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**How can a study of the 1989 Tiananmen Square  
protests inform understandings of fidelity and  
change in Alain Badiou's philosophy?**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis asks what the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests ('Tiananmen') can tell us about Alain Badiou's philosophy of fidelity and its relationship to change, drawing on the concepts of immanence, rupture and conflict. The thesis consists of: analysis of the broad philosophical system of which fidelity and change are an integral element, so as to highlight the key philosophical stakes; analysis of how Maoism and the Cultural Revolution connect to Tiananmen, which highlights problems relating to periodisation and nomination in Badiou's understanding of fidelity; examination of how broader interpretive grids in the contemporary era can maintain the 'state of the situation' or a dominant 'worlding' – demonstrated through analysis of framings of the Tiananmen protests in English-language news media and academia; and a discussion of grass-roots worker activism in 1989 and subsequent years, through which it is argued that Badiou's increased emphasis on the evental 'encounter' and immanent change in his later texts provides the best recourse in locating the emergence of novelty – the central lesson being the ability of the Chinese workers to maintain a mode of anti-state politics within the state on account of its localised and ad-hoc nature. The thesis finds that the success of fidelity as a concept for locating novel change hinges upon investigation of evental encounters within the state, and that tying investigation of fidelity to ahistorical and universal referents hinders such an endeavour.

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis asks what the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests ('Tiananmen') can tell us about Alain Badiou's philosophy of fidelity and its relationship to change, drawing on the concepts of immanence, rupture and conflict?

As a 'soixante-huitard' and unapologetic Maoist, Badiou's philosophy has embodied a commitment to a radical emancipatory politics and an interest in the emergence of novelty within and against established orders of politics. Concepts such as 'subjects', 'events', 'sequences', 'situations', and 'worlds' feature in his work in this context. Whilst he has spoken of different kinds of events in art, love and science, it is the revolutionary political event to which he always returns. Indeed, he makes 'fidelity' to the event an ethical end in itself (Badiou, 2001).

The notion of fidelity has come to have an important function in Badiou's philosophy in explaining change. The emergence of a novel truth is supported by a subjective form<sup>1</sup> through an act of fidelity – what he calls a 'truth-procedure'. Fidelity provokes questions about how immanence, rupture and conflict enable change. What are the mechanisms through which an act of fidelity might take place? Does it come as abrupt change, how does novelty relate to what has gone before, how does it relate to the endurance or destruction of old forms of identity and order in a situation or world?

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<sup>1</sup> The 'subject' is not though understood here in terms of an individual 'psychological subject' following psychoanalysis, nor a 'transcendental subject' akin to Kantian philosophy, or a 'reflexive' Cartesian subject. Instead, the subject is a (political) subject *of* a contingent event: a specific occurrence that emerges simultaneously to a truth-procedure – a relationship that I examine further in Chapter Two Cf. BADIOU, A. 2001. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, London, Verso. Pg. 43.



Whilst Badiou's personal fidelity to the May 1968 protests ('May '68') in France and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution ('the Cultural Revolution') in China has been discussed extensively within the secondary literature, serious examination of his philosophy in relation to the historical particularities of such events has been sorely lacking. As I discuss in this thesis, it may be that this is the case because of the way in which subjective forcing has been understood in his work. Badiou's work is however immense in its scope and contains a wide variety of philosophical resources that can be used in examining fidelity and change in his philosophy, as I intend to do in the text below.

### **1.1.Badiou's Influences**

In Europe, during the 1960s, an understanding of the limitations of existing Marxist orthodoxies encouraged a move away from an exclusive focus on the industrial proletariat on the socialist left, and towards "a heterogeneous combination of students, intellectuals, artists, bohemians and layabouts", harking back to the spirit of the Paris Commune (Lütticken, 2014: 117). The direct experience of May 1968 and observation of the Chinese Cultural Revolution from afar encouraged a pronounced re-evaluation for thinkers such as Badiou. These sequences highlighted the 'inadequacy' of the party as the primary mechanism of revolutionary politics (Badiou, 2008b: 36).

Badiou has himself been explicit in describing the intellectual debt he owes to May '68 and the Cultural Revolution, one which he frames in terms of his own concept of 'fidelity' to the event, highlighting: "the politics of the French Maoists between 1966 and 1976, which tried to think and practice a fidelity to two entangled events: the Cultural Revolution in China and May '68 in France" (Badiou, 2001: 42).

The novelty of May '68 and the Cultural Revolution lay not only in a perceived move away from a preeminent focus on the party, but in a broader notion of 'cultural revolution' in which new fronts for resistance could be opened-up. The connection between cultural revolution and the event is an important one here, for although Badiou came to pour scorn on the reduction of the political to culture, sequences like May '68 and the Cultural Revolution appeared to display a new revolutionary potential (Bosteels, 2005: 589-590).

We can perhaps best understand the relations between the two through what Ross has described as the twin figures of 'the worker' and 'the colonial militant', in which the context of anti-imperialism in the Third World became linked to specific sites of resistance in Europe. This took place through the 'lived' experience of a '*relational*' political subjectivity based on a "polemics of equality" that connected intellectual problems and contestations with everyday workers' struggles. She notes that:

"For many people on the left in France, it was Maoism that provided the relay, the means to make the transition, to shift the focus from the colonial peasant back to the worker at home..." (Ross, 2002: 10-11)

Maoism and the Cultural Revolution are particularly important to the development of Badiou's work through what Bosteels describes in his introduction to *Theory of the Subject* as the latter's "flair for historical periodization... in order to intervene in the actual historicization of Marxism..." As such, Badiou's concept of the event is firmly rooted in his earlier texts in a reading of the history of the radical left. The Cultural Revolution represents a stage in the progressive development of left thought, following from the popular riots and revolts of the Nineteenth Century – including the Paris Commune –

through to 1917, and the constitution of communist party-states in Europe and the Soviet Union (Badiou, 2009b: xix-xx).

Badiou's turn to Maoism was cemented by a sense of betrayal at the lack of movement from the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1968, and the Maoist Union des communistes de France, Marxiste-Léniniste (UCFML) became central to the development of Badiou's work (Hallward, 2003: 35). A rigid 'formalism' within established Marxist theories of dialectical materialism – which failed to provide adequate space for thinking the effects of novelty – was rejected in favour of a Maoist principle of 'investigation'. As such, knowledge and truth could be productively opposed to one another through the intervention of the activist (Bosteels, 2005: 580, Wright, 2013: 31). Conflict and fidelity are therefore always connected in Badiou's philosophy. Questions do though persist as to the precise nature of this relationship, and in writing this thesis I have been mindful of what Wright has termed as an "aggressive denial of the historical determination of worldly situations, including both the historical reproduction of conflictual relations, and the vital deployment of historical discourse within conflicts where change is genuinely at stake" in many readings of Badiou (Wright, 2013: 19).

Investigation is a sharply polemical historicist practice, intended to deploy historical knowledge in a way that enables radical change in the present. This involves attacking and disrupting established accounts so as to promote a countervailing narrative, which is the support of a subjective form. It is the reality of class oppression and the necessity of radical subjective forms as the bearers of resistance and change to which Badiou is committed above all else. Investigation is therefore predicated on fidelity, which is itself predicated on the necessity of change. The faithful subject is the bearer of change in a situation or world.

Revolutionary sequences and their signal-events are the points at which revolutionary knowledge is made real and forges new truths in the present, which can mobilise and radicalise communities of faithful subjects (Badiou, 2008a, Bosteels, 2005, Hallward, 2003, Meillassoux, 2011, Pluth, 2010).

This at least is the theory. In order to test whether Badiou's mode of historical investigation (*polemics faithful to the 'generic' truth of class struggle*) can achieve what it claims for a radical politics (meaningful change – *novelty*) we have to come up with some more concrete examples of this process in action. Badiou himself can of course function as just as much of an object of study here as anyone else. What do Badiou's claims about revolutionary sequences entail and effectuate? How do Badiou's historical claims rub-up against other historical narratives – those made by historians? How do the actors in the sequences that Badiou writes about themselves deploy historical discourse where meaningful change is at stake? What is the function of the mode of subjectivity that may emerge? How does it help or hinder change?

## **1.2. Argument**

The Cultural Revolution was one of my initial starting points in thinking through these problems as it is at the centre of Badiou's own personal journey – it subjectivates and radicalises him (Hallward, 2003: 31). The Cultural Revolution inspires much of Badiou's work even if his opinion of it changes, and his changing reflections on the Cultural Revolution mirror changes in his broader work. Whilst his earlier work viewed the Cultural Revolution through the lens of the party as a vehicle of change, through which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) undergoes a metamorphosis of sorts, his later writings have seen the Cultural Revolution through the lens of anti-party mass politics.

The question that emerges for Badiou out of this personal journey of his is “what gives a unity to politics, if it is not directly guaranteed by the formal unity of the state? (Badiou, 2005: 484)” However, the two changing orientations to the party-state in his work, as Bruno Bosteels has noted, are both rooted in investigation as the primary methodological and ultimately, revolutionary, device (Bosteels, 2005).

In Chapter Three of this thesis I engage with the Cultural Revolution and am ultimately in many ways more sympathetic to the (earlier) work of Badiou, which contemplates the metamorphosis that the state undergoes with its immanent movements and conflicts. I find the politics of anti-state rupture that he endorses in the Cultural Revolution to be problematic as Maoist praxis reinforced state power, and workers and students remained tied to the state.

I do though rediscover a mode of anti-state politics beginning with the 1989 Tiananmen protests in Chapter Five, which became my primary means of exploring the wider utility and applicability of Badiou’s work. Being able to test Badiou against a more modern context is certainly appealing, as is being able to think about the international applicability of his ideas. That the Tiananmen protests come chronologically after the Cultural Revolution is also helpful as it allows us to more thoroughly explore the significance of the Cultural Revolution for radical politics.

In Chapters Five and Six I argue that contemporary labour activism in China represents a political novelty that emerges from the Tiananmen sequence. I argue that, unlike the Cultural Revolution, in 1989 workers manage to break free of the shackles of the communist party.

It is only possible to paint this picture though by providing something of a broader account and a more nuanced description of causal linkages across time. This is why in Chapter Three I foreground some of the problems of nomination that emerge out of the Cultural Revolution, as it enables the castigation of workers in the 1980s and then the Tiananmen protests. As opposed to an assertive and affirmative discourse driven by a prescriptive agenda, it is in fact the result of being at the receiving end of exclusionary rhetoric and treatment that forces a change for the workers and finally severs their links with the party-state.

In order to explain this process, and to draw out a wider utility for Badiou's work, I also felt it necessary in Chapter Four to take on dominant historical narratives of the Tiananmen protests just as Badiou had done in the case of the Cultural Revolution. By showing how universalising accounts have attempted to ensnare the Tiananmen protests I was able to provide a better contrast with what I see as being genuinely novel in the actions of Chinese workers, beginning in 1989, and how it preserves a politics of rupture. This also allowed me to draw attention to what I see as most problematic in Badiou's work – namely his deployment of ahistorical and universal referents – and what I see as being most productive in his work – how we effectuate a politics of rupture immanently within a situation or world via the evental encounter, without conceding too much to its ordering logics.

### 1.2.1. Structure

Throughout the thesis I return repeatedly to the issue of ahistorical referents in Badiou's philosophy and readings of it from other thinkers. As I detail in Chapter Two, the dialectic, and in particular the relationship between idealism and materialism, have a vital function in Badiou's work. As such, I am skeptical of a tendency in readings of his philosophy, inspired by contemporary continental philosophy, to emphasise a rhetorical form of 'nomination' above political economy and institutional structures. In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou cautions us against the seemingly noble recourse to 'aristocratic idealism' in countering what he calls 'democratic materialism' in contemporary politics and philosophy "often under the shelter provided by a communist vocabulary". Such nostalgia is inherently conservative, Badiou argues, demanding a cessation and a return to a simpler and purer form (Badiou, 2009a: 3).

As I will elaborate in this thesis however, there are many points at which Badiou himself, and readers of his work threaten a recourse to such an idealism that runs against the dialectic. Crucially, for our purposes in this thesis, there are important implications for how we think about fidelity in Badiou's work: whether we are speaking of a rarefied, pure politics rhetorically sustained by a community of believers – one that invokes a kind of aristocratic ethic, and what challenges that might pose to thinking the possibility and mechanisms of change.

The thesis consists of four main interrelated sections:

Firstly, description of the broad philosophical system of which fidelity and change are an integral element, so as to highlight the key philosophical stakes. These

include the function of the dialectic in Badiou's work and its relationship to Maoist 'investigation'; the nature of the ordering 'count' that governs a 'situation' or 'world'; and how that relates to the appearance of novelty and a faithful 'truth-procedure' through immanence/rupture/conflict.

Secondly, analysis of how Maoism and the Cultural Revolution connect to Tiananmen, which highlights problems relating to periodisation and nomination in Badiou's understanding of fidelity. Doing so brings attention to tensions between immanence and rupture within his understanding of historical change: whether we are faithful to 'generic' truth, universal referents and treat the political subject akin to a persistent sociological category through 'tenacious' rhetorical nomination, which ties designations of rupture to the state of the situation; or whether we emphasise contradiction, difference, immanent conflict and change, within the state.

Thirdly, through analysis of framings of the Tiananmen protests in English-language news media and academia I describe how broader interpretive grids in the contemporary era can be equally complicit in maintaining the state of the situation or a dominant 'worlding' as the 'counter-nomination' of the institutional state. Such broad framings, I argue, reify the world they purport to critique, present a closure of the political and an occlusion of important contradictions that might be radicalised against the ordering power of the state. As a result, immanent notions of subversion can remain tied to the 'encyclopaedia' of the state of the situation and a hegemonic order of 'communication'.



Fourthly, I ask, if immanent subversion and nomination can both be complicit in the maintenance of the state of the situation, then what means do we have for thinking the emergence of genuine change? Through the example of grass-roots worker activism in 1989 and subsequent years, I argue that Badiou's increased emphasis on the evental 'encounter' and immanent change in his later texts provides the best recourse. As such, the central lesson involves the ability of the Chinese workers to maintain a mode of anti-state politics within the state on account of its localised and ad-hoc nature. Generic worker subjectivity is thus dependent on a form of anti-state politics sustained by an ongoing conflict with the state on a localised scale. This encourages us to rethink the role of the singular revolutionary event and what fidelity might mean in the contemporary era.

### **1.3. Methods**

These arguments were only ultimately possible because of my own historical investigations and the manner in which I read Badiou's ideas against other established accounts of the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen protests, and this therefore forms the methodological crux of the thesis alongside my reading of fidelity and change in Badiou's philosophy. The focus on philosophy and change necessitates a certain selectiveness as has my engagement with historical narratives. I am not a proficient French or Mandarin speaker and could not therefore directly engage with Badiou's texts that have yet to be translated into English, nor could I engage directly with accounts of the Cultural Revolution, the 1989 Tiananmen protests or post-1989 worker activism that have likewise not been translated into English.

This imposed necessary limitations, but it also made an enormous body of literature somewhat more manageable. Just as Badiou's target in the case of the Cultural Revolution had been the received accounts of the Cultural Revolution within Western intellectual discourse, my own reading of the Tiananmen protests was able to follow suit – although I added, due to the more contemporary context in the case of Tiananmen, a discussion of the media reporting that was absent during the Cultural Revolution due to the diplomatic isolation of China. Further, because Badiou's target has been the mainstream historiography of the Cultural Revolution in the West, it was not problematic to access these sources in my own discussion of the Cultural Revolution. In the case of post-1989 worker activism, which has been generally side-lined by mainstream media in the West in favour of the coverage afforded to dissident human rights activists, the language limitations were somewhat more noticeable in accessing timely, up-to-date information. I was though fortunate in that the study of labour relations in China is much more accessible in English-language sources than it has been previously. There is a substantive and growing body of work in this area that I was able to draw upon, and my own discussions with Chinese scholars and activists at conferences convinced me that I was on the right track. The immense scale of labour activism in China was ultimately unavoidable, and the thesis would have been poorer for its omission.

Furthermore, because I see the primary contribution of this thesis as being to Badiou scholarship rather than Chinese history or philosophy per se I am willing to justify the selection of historical sources being led by the concepts and problems that emerge when we think about fidelity and change in Badiou's work. The primary thrust of the thesis is in testing Badiou's philosophical Maoism – and its correlates in his reading of the Cultural

Revolution – against the more complex and less rarefied sequence that is found in the historical record (what I term as ‘actually-existing Maoism’).

### **1.3.1. The Cultural Revolution and Evental Historiography**

Badiou’s dismissal of the mainstream historiography of the Cultural Revolution is an obstacle to be surmounted given that he has reasons within his own philosophy for dismissing them. He ultimately though unfairly characterises them as being overly focussed on ‘terror’.

As such, Badiou argues in *The Century* that terror should not be dismissed as blind barbarism, but must be understood to contain a political reason of its own, one which is connected to a kind of zeitgeist that characterises the Twentieth Century (2008a: 4). If the mainstream historical accounts of the Cultural Revolution were fixated solely on an irrational form of violence and barbarity as Badiou often alleges, then this may well be a fair reason to dismiss them. This is not though the case, and a great deal of effort has been expounded in elucidating the political logics and economic forces that have animated Chinese politics during the Red Years, as I discuss at length in Chapter Three. Badiou would of course retort here that by focusing on such causes, mainstream historiography explains away what is ‘real’ in ‘revolution’, namely, the reality of class struggle (Wright, 2013: 192). However, by making the reality of the event dependent upon a pre-existing meta-real in class struggle the novelty of the evental rupture is threatened. Further, in arguing that a subjective capacity for action that summons the real must always be rooted in the political imperatives of the present – “Who has ever done anything in the name of an undetermined future (Badiou, 2008a: 20)?” – Badiou decries the utopian political imaginaries that have so often underscored progressive conceptions of the political real.

Badiou's polemic against mainstream historiography is thus somewhat problematic, but this is not a reason to dismiss the internal logic of his arguments out of hand. Even if dismissing the mainstream historiography of the Cultural Revolution is undesirable there are strong reasons for reading it alongside or against Badiou's account. By focussing on the somewhat problematic polemical Badiou we can draw out the function of the real in 'evental historiography', as Wright terms it, which is to radicalise the nomination of historical events so that it might puncture established narratives and serve as a support for a new horizon of political possibility. Just how novel this is proves to be one of the more tricky parts of Badiou's relationship with history, as he seeks to marshal past events in the service of "a new present" (Wright, 2013). The eruption of novelty in the present therefore depends upon us taking something new from history.

'Each time' this eruption of novelty takes place it invokes the generic real of politics, but it is not the same 'all the time' as it might be through a historical-materialist causal chain (Wright, 2013: 190). Instead, a vaguer and more reductionist Marxist-Leninist-Maoist lineage is invoked, which in no way implies some kind of progressive telos, but instead, invariant flashes of revolutionary will – and if the arguments of *The Century* are anything to go by, a necessary violence (Badiou, 2008a: 32-34). This is though where what is 'real' in the event becomes somewhat abstracted from history and the event comes to figure as the kind of utopian imaginary that Badiou denounces. Knowledge of the reality of class struggle is linked across time and subjective cult-like violence through destruction and recomposition – "it amounts to a subjective claim that may attain the characteristics of a cult" (Badiou, 2008a: 32) – re-invents the event as a concept that can mobilise in the present and draw legitimacy from historical pre-cursors (Meillassoux, 2011, Wright, 2013: 196). Revolution is therefore made real through the conceptual power of the event and its

ability to force a link where it did not exist before.

Borrowing from Deleuze, Badiou uses the term ‘disjunctive synthesis’ for this relationship (Badiou, 2008a: 31). He notes that the Twentieth Century is a “voluntaristic century” (Badiou, 2008a: 15), and here we can find some truth in the Stalinist characterisation of Maoism: that in a ‘disjunction’ where the ‘right conditions’ are absent, only a violent forcing can present itself. Maoism is disjunctive through and through, riddled with contradiction and never the same to itself for long (as I will discuss in Chapter Three). The political reason that the Cultural Revolution displays – and indeed the broader political sequence of which it is a part, going back to the 1950s, at least, and probably earlier – is whimsical, varying as much with Mao’s moods and elite squabbles, as through a consistently applied mode of contingent praxis.

The mainstream historiography of the Cultural Revolution is helpful in bringing attention to these contradictions in a way that Maoist narratives have not allowed. Badiou’s unapologetic adoption of the latter makes him arguably more insider than insurgent in this case. The places of orthodox and heterodox historiographies are thus somewhat inverted here and may be productively opposed to one another. In doing so we can push Badiou’s interpretive framework up against the grain of actually-existing Maoism, asking what becomes of a revolutionary concept when it is tested by a genuine political sequence – state power, cultish violence, feuds and famines. How does the event survive as a concept? To what ends is it put? What changes does it endure? What subjective supports does it require?

### **1.3.2. The Selection of Tiananmen**

There are though additional problems that must be recognised at the outset. Badiou is a difficult thinker to approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, a reader is struck by the immense scale of his intellectual output, the broad repertoire of ideas he draws upon and the large web of interlinked concepts, all underpinned by a unique lexicon. Secondly, and related to the above, are a series of methodological issues. Badiou's writing style and philosophical approach intersperses political polemics with mathematics, comments on literature, the performing arts and aesthetics. Historical investigation appears alongside mathematical reasoning and philosophical concepts that can seem abstract to the uninitiated and labyrinthine for those well versed in his work. Badiou's reading of history is not though supported by empirical evidence, references relating to specific sources or interviews. Instead, it is purposefully polemical in tone, often drawing upon the lineage of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought and praxis. I have not sought to hide from these issues in the thesis, and have instead tried to engage with them 'head-on' as much as possible.

The 1989 Tiananmen protests can help us do this because, as discussed above, chronologically they come after the Cultural Revolution, and in charting the relationship between the two we are also naturally mirroring the same chronological period in Badiou's writing. Tiananmen provides a means of testing whether the claims Badiou has made about changes in politics after the Cultural Revolution can be maintained, and what this can tell us about the broader function of fidelity and change in his philosophy.

Tiananmen also seems to provide a useful framework for thinking the shift in emphasis from 'situation' to 'world' in Badiou's later work. Moving away from the socialist milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, structural changes in global politics feed back into wider society,

and we might assume, dissidence and protest. If in 1989 we were to look back on the preceding decade we might note how the anti-colonial struggles of earlier decades, the Non-Aligned Movement and the capitalist-communist struggle, had been displaced by the era of ‘structural adjustment’, the rapprochement between China and the West, China’s capitalist reforms, glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union, and the seemingly endless march of globalisation.

In this context it might seem that the tactical ‘everyday’ struggles against the wars in Algeria or Vietnam, for sexual equality and civil rights had been replaced (Roberts, 2006, Ross, 2002), depending upon one’s point of view, by either a new kind of mass-democratising ethic from Poland to China, and/or the need for a new kind of counter-hegemonic activism to resist ‘neoliberalism’, one grounded in a notion of the ‘multitude’ and perhaps best embodied in the infamous ‘Battle of Seattle’ a decade on from Tiananmen, in 1999 (Agamben, 1993, Hardt and Negri, 2001, Klein, 2001).

In subsequent years, post-2008, the ‘Occupy’ protests, the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the ‘Movimento Anti-Copa de Decoração de Ruas’ in Brazil might seem to affirm that such a shift has taken place. Student protest in Tiananmen Square has been rhetorically linked to all of these occurrences. As such, Giorgio Agamben went so far as to suggest, back in 1993, that Tiananmen would be the signal event for a new kind of protest in a postmodern world, one grounded in a generic ‘state-non-state’ opposition (Agamben, 1993).

I am though skeptical of such claims for a number of reasons. As Badiou argues in *Being and Event*, the ‘evental sites’ that meaningful changes emerge from are necessarily

localised. When we speak of protests in Brazil, Egypt or Turkey in recent years we are speaking of some markedly different political contexts. Erdoğan's brand of Muslim conservatism differs to Rousseff's centre-left politics, and both to that of the Egyptian junta or the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite Badiou's concept of 'generic' truth, as I will discuss later in the thesis, he has also repeatedly emphasised how different kinds of protest and activism can be qualitatively different in the manner that they respond to contingent events. Not all resistance, or political change more broadly for that matter, is of the same order.

I would further add that different subjective identities must also be accounted for. Whether we are discussing the battles between secularising and religious conservatism, or the explosion of sectarian violence, it seems that identity politics has a recurring power, one that has arguably been intensified by the end of the Cold War and globalisation, as the horrors of Srebrenica, Rwanda and the Intifada would also attest. Badiou engages with these kinds of issues, and gives us tools for investigating how subjective interventions and encounters relate to the structural logic of conflicts, so that we might differentiate between them and judge the extent to which novelty is present.

Exploring fidelity in relation to Tiananmen therefore has the potential to tell us a great deal about how different readings of Badiou's philosophy may inform how we think about political change in the contemporary era of global politics.

### **1.3.3. The Problem of Tiananmen**

It is in this context that I wish to introduce the principal problems that relate to the popular narrative surrounding the 1989 Tiananmen protests in Anglophone sources. There is a



tendency for momentous historical occurrences to be reduced down to an evocative singular moment or image after the fact in the popular memory. In 1989 there were two standout examples: the end of the Berlin Wall as a meaningful barrier between East and West following the lifting of travel restrictions on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November; and the earlier Tiananmen Square incident on June 4<sup>th</sup>, as the Chinese military ended protests that had lasted for over a month and a half. This latter fact is important as it tells us that despite the focus placed on a single day for the convenience of commemoration; both are subject to a larger history. The ‘Tank Man’ photographs, which have proved the most enduring symbol of Tiananmen were in fact taken on June 5<sup>th</sup>, as tanks left the square – a not insignificant fact that I discuss later in the thesis. Likewise, if we were to refer to the 9<sup>th</sup> of November solely as the day on which the Berlin Wall was demolished in a moment of high drama, then doing so would be misleading. The important question to ask in any such case is to just who or what is this account faithful and what does it omit? Asking this question makes possible a re-evaluation of a narrative in its entirety, rather than assuming the basic facts and seeking to re-work the finer details as is so often the case.

Given that in the case of the Tiananmen Square incident the details have been subject to extensive revision in the years since, there is a strong case for viewing wider conceptions of what took place, who was involved and where it happened with a degree of suspicion. The Chinese Authorities’ account of what took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1989 has not been taken seriously outside of China, and instead Western journalists, academics, armchair observers and Chinese student dissidents have provided the authoritative English-language accounts. They are however also highly problematic.

There was an element of fortuity in that Western journalists would likely not have been able to cover the protests and violence in such large numbers and with such easy access to students in Tiananmen Square had it not been for a Sino-Soviet summit taking place in May 1989 – the first in decades (Oberdorfer, 1989). Mikhail Gorbachev was the main ‘draw’, but journalists were drawn to the protests, covering both simultaneously (Dobbs, 1989). The linking of the two can be contextualised in terms of the media attention that surrounded a thawing of Cold War tensions, Gorbachev’s reforms in the Soviet Union, and the decline of communism in Eastern Europe, at the heart of which was the popularity of Gorbachev himself. This combined with the eagerness of student protest leaders in Tiananmen Square to solicit Western media attention so as to create a ‘perfect storm’ in which Western journalists were only too eager to participate.

As William Sun has noted, charismatic student leaders such as Wu’er Kaixi received the most attention from Western media (Sun, 1997: 7), and the privileged position that these individuals carved-out for themselves during the protests and in the years since has been detailed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> When contrasted against a Party gerontocracy, it is not difficult to see

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<sup>2</sup> There were a number of elements to this: financial, in that student leaders received payment from Western journalists for stories, and Wu’er was accused of misappropriating money from donations that had flooded into the students – principally from Hong Kong; the place of gender, with predominantly all-male leadership; the place of class – with the exclusion of workers, as will be discussed extensively in the remainder of the thesis – and the ways it related to a broader history in which Chinese students could claim moral and social superiority. All these factors were reflected in patriarchal hierarchies that mirrored the structure of the Communist Party and saw student leaders surround themselves with entourages of loyal supporters. Cf. CHAN, A. & ZHU, X. 2001. Persons of Unknown Identity (Suspicious Persons) and Rioting. *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, 33, 3-74. Pg. 16, FEIGON, L. 1990. *China Rising: the Meaning of Tiananmen*, Chicago, I.R. Dee, FEIGON, L. 1994. Gender and the Chinese Student Movement. In: PERRY, E. J. & WASSERSTROM, J. N. (eds.) *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*. Oxford: Westview Press, HARRISTON, K. 1990. 1,000 Remember Tiananmen; Protest Leaders Attend Memorial At U.S. Capitol. *The Washington Post*, 4 June, PYE, L. 1990.

how media and technology-savvy young men would become the focus of attention outside of China. These student protest leaders have continued to influence public discourse in the United States, where many were given asylum. They have appeared before Congressional hearings on numerous occasions in the years since, as well as at academic conferences, whilst a number of them have published memoirs (Constantine, 1991, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2009). The overreliance on these individuals has no doubt helped promote their own views of what took place in 1989, and has also contributed towards inaccuracy in media reporting. For example, it was erroneously reported that the Tank Man was student leader Wang Dang, and Wu'er Kaixi reported that he had seen two hundred protesters gunned down in Tiananmen Square despite having left several hours previously (Harriston, 1990, Mathews, 2010).

The issue of who was killed, where, and in what numbers is vitally important, but has not been given the analysis it deserves. Access to such details is difficult due to the obstinate position of the Chinese authorities, but nor has there been a great willingness from Western journalists to re-evaluate the issue. Here we have two extremes: of underestimating and overestimating the death toll. The Chinese government has poured scorn on claims that protesters were killed despite evidence to the contrary; whilst claims of a 'massacre' in the Square that were printed in foreign media during the following days also appear to be open to question.

Graham Earnshaw, a Reuters correspondent based in China at the time, has claimed to have been the only Western journalist in the Square when the Chinese military finally

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moved into it, and argues that no shooting took place in Tiananmen Square itself. In his evaluation a few hundred were killed at most, with shooting around the perimeter of the Square the result of a confrontation between an enraged crowd and soldiers. He adds that students had left the Square peacefully as a result of an agreement with the military before the soldiers moved in,<sup>3</sup> and that stories of sleeping students being crushed in their tents by tanks were simply incorrect. Further, he notes that Reuters declined to distribute a photograph of the scorched body of a Chinese soldier to other media outlets (Earnshaw, 1989).

Likewise, the Washington Post's Jay Mathews, in reflecting on his own contribution to the 'myth' of a 'Tiananmen massacre' notes that the use of the term 'massacre' in his own writing was 'space-saving shorthand'. He adds that a claim by a BBC reporter to have seen students being shot in the middle of the Square was particularly spurious, given that it simply was not visible from the hotel roof he claimed to have witnessed it from (Mathews, 2010). However, the veteran BBC reporter John Simpson argues that: "Sometimes, even today, the Chinese authorities try to give the impression that there was no massacre in Tiananmen Square. Literally speaking, that is true; the massacre took place in the roads leading to it, rather than in the Square itself. But there is no doubt that large numbers of people died" (Simpson, 2009). For Simpson, it is largely inconsequential that details were wrongly reported at the time, because the facticity of state violence against the protesters itself persists as an essential kernel of truth, which remains to this day.

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<sup>3</sup> Robin Munro also claims to have directly witnessed this alongside Richard Nations, and notes that the departure of the students from the Square was filmed by a Spanish film crew MUNRO, R. 1990. Who Died in Beijing, and Why? *The Nation*, 11 June. Pg. 819.

Simpson's statement is problematic in that it largely reduces the importance and meaning of what took place in Beijing in 1989 to an act of violence, and a simple dichotomy between 'state' and 'non-state' (Agamben, 1993). The questions of why the violence took place, who was killed, why the protests happened, what form they took, who was involved in them, how space was used in resistance and repression, and what the legacy has been in the years since, all speak to a much broader and more complex history.

George Black noted in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990 that: "Most of the 1,000 or so cut down by gunfire and crushed by armored [*sic*] vehicles were workers and ordinary Beijing residents. These were people who did not speak English, could not quote Patrick Henry and built no replicas of the Statue of Liberty. They were also the people who terrified Deng Xiaoping" (Black, 1990). Likewise, Robin Munro, who was present in Beijing during the protests and violence wrote in *The Nation* during the same year that:

"The great majority of those who died (perhaps as many as a thousand in all) were workers, or *laobaixing*... and they died mainly on the approach roads in western Beijing. Several dozen people died in the immediate environs of the square and a few in the square itself. But to speak of that as the real massacre distorts the citywide nature of the carnage and diminishes the real political drama that unfolded in Tiananmen Square". He adds: "There was something in the pacifistic idealism of the students that triggered memories of the 1960s and the civil rights movement, riveting Western attention on the students and causing the crucial role of the *laobaixing* to be largely overlooked... And there was more: some predisposition, perhaps, on the media's part to believe in a massacre in the square as the necessary

consummation of an allegory of innocence, sacrifice and redemption” (Munro, 1990: 811).

Whilst I would not dispute Munro’s account of the idealism of journalists – in Chapter Four I discuss the comparisons with Western counter-culture that abound in newspapers, academic works and literary magazines – we can I think see a broader array of ideological entanglements at work. Workers movements of the left did not fit easily with the heady euphoria prevailing at the end of the Cold War. Student slogans such as ‘democracy and science’ seemed to encapsulate a progressive contemporaneity that meshed easily with occurrences elsewhere (Calhoun, 1989: 29-30). Nor for that matter did they fit with a growing conceptual apparatus in use by academics that emphasised the triumph of capitalism – the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama, 1993) – and the arrival of a postmodern world in which old markers of identity, conflict and resistance no longer had relevance, that we were all now simply consumers. Given this conceptual hegemony we can see the kinds of difficulties that might be involved in detecting novel political forms that break the mould. It is my contention though that a study of conflict and fidelity in Badiou’s philosophy has the potential to help us do just that.

## **2. Badiou's Philosophy: Subject and Event**

### **2.1. Introduction**

In this chapter I will introduce the key stakes in thinking the relationship between fidelity and change in Badiou's philosophy. I am aided in this task by the wide body of work on Badiou that has emerged in recent years within Anglophone academia. The breadth of this literature is a testament to the immense scope of Badiou's work, covering topics such as ontology, mathematics, aesthetics, ethics, politics, music and theology. The topic of this thesis mandates a certain selectiveness, and in short, because we are dealing with fidelity and change, then that must provide the criteria for inclusion in our analysis. Within that criterion there is a further qualification, as I have not sort to delve into Badiou's own philosophical influences in great depth. Instead, my central concern has been the internal logic of Badiou's thought and how it relates to practical political concerns.

The one exception to this rule has though been Maoism, which in this and the subsequent chapters of the thesis receives a significant degree of attention. Such a stance is I believe justified by my focus on fidelity and change. Maoism ultimately has a marked influence on the manner in which Badiou discusses subjective interventions that bring historical change. Whilst Althusser, Lacan and Mallarmé might have influenced Badiou's philosophy in many ways, their influence on how Badiou thinks about the function of fidelity in history is not as clear-cut as that of Maoism. I am aware as well that finding a manageable route through the immense scope of Badiou's philosophy is difficult enough without introducing an Althusser or Lacan, thinkers whose own work rivals the scope of Badiou's. Furthermore, as I noted in the previous chapter, Maoism is also especially relevant because of the investigation of the 1989 Tiananmen protests in the thesis.

Badiou's interest in Maoism as a means of thinking the possibility of radical political change also echoes my own interest in fidelity and change in his philosophy. I am aware though of the difficulties that this subjective element within Badiou's work brings, and in this and the subsequent chapters I will attempt to gauge whether or not they are insurmountable. As such, one of the primary difficulties in reading Badiou is the overlapping of normative/value-laden, prescriptive and descriptive concepts and agendas, and also of separating out the question of subjective ownership of them. Saying that an objectifying order of knowledge exists is not the same as saying that it possesses objective truth, but making that distinction does not necessarily preclude us from making our own truth claims. Such an understanding is what ultimately separates Badiou from the contemporary trend of scepticism where questions of truth are concerned. For Badiou, the subjective nature of truth does not disavow it, but instead, it gives it potency, turning it into a weapon that can be wielded in the hands of the revolutionary. The act of description, with an investigation into the status quo, injustice, oppression, dominant structures, allows a prescriptive agenda that is oriented towards a different set of values to force its way into history and consciousness, through a rupture – the 'event'.

The precise nature of that rupture and the manner in which the truth that it brings into the world appears and is sustained are all open to question though within Badiou's work. This is because his own position has not been static over the years, because his work is rich and varied enough for academics to explore different aspects of it, and because critical engagement with the contradictions and inconsistencies of his philosophy, as well as its strengths, in turn sustains debate on the issue.



As I noted in Chapter One, an area that has been insufficiently explored within the wider academic literature on Badiou's work is the testing of his concepts against real examples of historical struggles, in more than just a flippant and polemical manner. This is important because, for Badiou, the event is as much an active tool that an activist-writer can use to intervene in a particular conflict as it is about the description of past occurrences.

The event is therefore necessarily embedded in conflict, and Badiou is interested in the logic of a conflict, and that within it that might bring novelty and rupture. His interest in 'sequences' and 'situations' or 'worlds' alongside events comes from a desire to suspend modes of historical narration in which dominant knowledge determines what is possible. As a thinker who is committed to a radical political programme, Badiou wants to be able to escape the subordination of subjective agency and the distinct truths that define it, to causal structure.

Badiou's approach to thinking about the nature and role of structure sets him apart from many of his contemporaries. In *Theory of the Subject* (2009b) he departs from the influential French anti-humanism developed by the likes of Althusser, Foucault and Lacan in that he does not make 'language' or 'discourse' the central edifice of determining structure through which language pre-determines subjective experience and the category of the subject itself (Badiou, 2009b: 187-188, James, 2012: 9-10). Badiou scornfully categorises 'discourse' as 'idealinguistry' – a form of linguistic idealism, which is not only isolated from its own birth in conflict – a necessary dialectical relationship with materialism – but also denies a revolutionary intervention in history; one that can bring about meaningful change in both the material and ideational conditions that order society (Badiou, 2009b: 188-189). This is not though to suggest that Badiou's work is free of

elements that might privilege a kind of rhetorical idealism, and I return repeatedly to the vexed question of ‘naming’ in this thesis.

As I intend to show in this chapter, dialectical relationships, (foremost of which is that between materialism and idealism, but also rupture and continuity, difference and universalism) remain important across Badiou’s work, even if the emphasis given to the dialectic as an overarching logic of historical change varies. Despite the alleged deviation in *Being and Event*, which I shall discuss below, Badiou’s approach to thinking a materialist theory of the subject, grounded in dialectical thinking, or what he refers to in *Logics of Worlds* as ‘dialectical materialism’, remains important across his work. This is not though the same ‘dialectical materialism’ that we see in orthodox Marxism, and the repeated support of a materialist theory of the subject in Badiou’s work depends upon the contrast with the former, alongside other political forms (Parliamentarism, democratic materialism, etc.):

1. In *The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic* (henceforth: ‘*The Rational Kernel*’) (2011) we see an attempt to bring Chinese thought into a reading of the intellectual history of left wing politics in France, through which Badiou introduces a dialectical opposition between ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ which will reappear across his subsequent texts.
2. In *Theory of the Subject* (2009b) Badiou subjects the relationship between materialism and idealism in orthodox Marxist theory and more contemporary structuralist and post-structuralist thought to a critical analysis. He argues that what is needed is a materialist theory of the subject. The category of the subject then becomes the means of intervening in dominant modes of thought that reproduce the

‘bourgeois world’ (Badiou, 2009b: 11). Out of this, Badiou presents us with a novel approach to thinking about periodisation and a theory of the relationship between being and its placement.

3. In *Being and Event* (2007a) at the point where Badiou has been accused of moving away from the dialectic and towards a quasi-theological approach to thinking the relationship between a ‘miraculous’ event and the grace-like fidelity of the subject, we see the continuing importance of the dialectic (Bensaïd, 2004, Bosteels, 2004). Badiou formalises a theory of subjective transformation in which the homogeneity of situations is always threatened by the contingent eruption of the event. The consequences that follow though also provide a kind of retrospective conditioning that legitimises novelty against established sequences (Meillassoux, 2011: 3-4).
4. In *Logics of Worlds* (2009a) Badiou introduces his theory of ‘being-there’, which allows him to chart the effects of an event as a measure of change *within* a situation or ‘world’ as they are now described (Badiou, 2009a, Pluth, 2010: 68). Exploring the ‘dialectical materialism’ that underpins the worlding of the subject allows Badiou to present the contrast with ‘democratic materialism’, which denies the possibility of genuine novelty through a focus on bodily affects and language (Badiou, 2009a: 1-2, 45 & 79).

In charting this conceptual progression, as I intend to do in the remainder of this chapter, it becomes clear that the event is very much a theoretical tool for the activist writer. The event not only relates to specific historical occurrences, but it also allows the writer to intervene in them, to chart relationships and to fix those moments wherein the ‘normal run of things’ is suspended and a new sequence springs into life. As such, I am indebted to those who have previously explored the function of dialectical thinking in Badiou’s work,

in particular Bruno Bosteels (2004, 2005, 2011) and Colin Wright (2013). I have benefited greatly from Wright's reading of the prominence of conflict across Badiou's work, and Bosteels' discussion of the legacy of Maoism and the importance of the dialectic for Badiou. Whilst I do not doubt the validity of Bosteels' characterisation of the importance of Badiou's own understanding of Maoism to the development of his subsequent work, as noted in the previous chapter and explored in greater depth in the next, I do doubt the validity of Badiou's framing of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution.

My own suspicion of Badiou's use of historical allegory in an often flippant and polemical manner has meant that I have wished to provide a degree of separation between the philosophical underpinnings of his work and its application to actual historical cases. This is both a departure from Badiou, who treats the two (un-critically) together, and the common tendency to read Badiou's philosophy in terms of a subjective forcing wherein the contradictions of a truth-procedure are subordinated to a pre-determined tactical position in politics. This is important because the argumentation in this thesis hinges upon the ability of historical investigation of conflict to inform the manner in which we think about fidelity and change, as opposed to starting from fixed referents.

The chapter adopts a largely chronological format following the sequence of texts listed above. They are not the sum of what Badiou has written, but I have focused on them to provide something of a window into the key dialectical relationships, philosophical concepts and problems that underpin fidelity and change in Badiou's work.

## 2.2. Maoist Dialectics: Truth and Knowledge

Whilst in the previous chapter I spoke of the legacy of May '68 and the Cultural Revolution, concomitant with Badiou's involvement in the Maoist UCFML, it is helpful here to draw-out in greater detail the effect that this formative period had on the development of his philosophy. Badiou participates in a long Marxist tradition that has viewed truth as a practical-material question. Whilst objectifying orders of knowledge exist, they are contingent configurations, rendered so by subjective truths that take place in-time, rupturing their apparent consistency (their *presentation*). In opposing 'knowledge' and 'truth' Badiou places himself at the Maoist end of the Marxist historical wedge.

Writing in *The Rational Kernel* (2011), first published in 1977, Badiou makes the case that the reading of Hegel by leftists in China had been markedly different to that in Europe and the Soviet Union. In the latter there had been a tendency to criticise idealist elements of Hegelian dialectics as connected to German conservatism (Badiou, 2011: 17). Although Badiou does not go into great detail in refuting that connection, it is a well-trodden path in Hegelian scholarship, but one that it is helpful to briefly travel so as to better contextualise Badiou's arguments.

The connection of Hegel to conservative thought comes from a number of areas. Firstly, some perceive a pro-state bent to his work, in which the rationality of state power is emphasised, or that the state somehow displays a final synthesis, an end. This can however only ever be a partial reading of Hegel, which overlooks the many complexities of his understanding of right, rationality and dialectics (cf. Berthold-Bond, 1989, Limnatis, 2010). Secondly, there is the perception that Hegel was an 'agent' of the Prussian state, a position that has been expertly refuted by Stephen Houlgate in his introduction to *Outlines*

*of the Philosophy of Right* (Houlgate, 2008). Houlgate shows that Hegel was invited to a Professorship in Berlin by a reform minded Prussian government minister, that Hegel was a vocal advocate of reform above conservatism, and that he was not as close to the authorities as has been alleged (Houlgate, 2008: xi-xii).

Hegel can also be shown to be distinct to the emerging German romantic-nationalist movements that had connected to philosophy and history in the academy: ‘sturm und drang’ and ‘historismus.’ Both had a pessimistic view of Enlightenment rationality and emerged alongside the weakening of religious institutions and the process of state formation. Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality were taken to be tainted on account of the violence of the French Revolution and were ascribed an ‘alien character’ in the popular consciousness due to the association with Napoleon’s invading armies (Spiegel, 1991: 412-413). Hegel had though been heavily influenced by the French Revolution, which features prominently in his lectures on the philosophy of history (Hegel, 2001) and *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*. The nationalists had sought recourse to a distinctively German form of historical jurisprudence which, in the words of Spiegel: “derived the law of the nation not from the arbitrary will of a lawgiver but from a mystic ‘folk soul,’ which was interpreted as the embodiment of folkish experience and characteristics, conceived as distinct from that of other peoples and manifesting itself in regional customs and mores” (Spiegel, 1991: 413-414). Hegel’s understanding came from a different direction though: the will of the people. As Hallward notes, “the arrival of the will of the people as an actor on the political stage over the course of the eighteenth century was itself a revolutionary development, and it was experienced as such by the people themselves” (Hallward, 2009: 17). This understanding of collectivity no longer needed to be wedded to an identification with the nation – understood in relation to a cultural and linguistic community – or

religion, but it instead sought new sources of political authority. For Hegel, freedom meant an individual recognising ‘himself’ in an act and taking ownership of it, this would result in ‘Right’, meaning it was grounded in a form of moral legitimacy (Hegel, 2001: 467). Right though had further entanglements in that it depended upon collective consciousness to function, and that was best guaranteed through laws and the institutions of state. This grants a further level of legitimacy for both ‘proper’ revolutionary action and the institutions of state. In the case of the French Revolution the state that follows the revolution demonstrates the grounding of a new collective national constitution, which is reflective of popular will, “the *Many* are *All*” as Hegel phrases it (Hegel, 2001: 466-467 & 468).

This runs in contrast to the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution in which the initial Jacobin victories are followed by a conservative backlash – what has been termed the Thermidorian period – as the urban bourgeoisie assert their interests through the institutions of the new state. They are in many ways aided by the revolution, which strengthens hands that had previously been tied by the old landed aristocracy. A new nationalism emerges – Bonapartism – which further aids the counter-revolutionaries. It is not surprising then that Hegel’s portrayal of the relationship between revolution and the state in the French Revolution would be interpreted as being somewhat counter-revolutionary – indeed Hegel himself appears to repeatedly praise Napoleon (Hegel, 2008). To speak of Hegelian ‘idealism’ in a Marxist context means then to be dismissive of a philosophy that is divorced from the concrete experiences of the proletariat, and which works-out contradictions in favour of the bourgeoisie (cf. Fine, 2001).

Badiou notes though that Chinese communists arrive at a different way of interpreting Hegel. Instead of viewing his dialectic as a totalising system, it should be understood as dividing into two (Badiou, 2011: 18). Internal contradiction between its conservative and revolutionary elements, or its ‘idealist shell’ and ‘materialist kernel’, provided a means of reconceptualising the relationship between thought and being, as well as ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ (Badiou, 2011xii & 18). The Hegelian dialectic provided a way of thinking contradiction that could be employed in revolutionary struggles. The institutions of state and the will of the people could be productively opposed to one-another, the relationships between urban and rural re-thought, etc.

In *The Rational Kernel* Badiou describes a desire to import “the rising rigor of the Chinese Proletarian” into France (Badiou, 2011: 13). As such, Maoism becomes the means through which Badiou critiques left-wing politics in France, and reinterprets the continuing value of Hegelian dialectics. Maoism introduces an internal schism to radical politics for Badiou, and as Bosteels notes, politics can no longer be judged against “an overarching sense of history”, but instead Maoists appear committed to maintaining the importance of class conflict and collective mass-action through revolutionary moments. Maoism also brings a movement away from a preoccupation with formal party structures, and instead a practical focus on the revolutionary in-time is emphasised – “a strictly conjunctural grasp of the laws of politics and their changing situations”, as Bosteels phrases it – a theme that is then developed in later books by Badiou in relation to ‘events’, ‘situations’ and ‘worlds’ (Bosteels, 2005: 585, 591 & 593).

Integral to this movement towards Maoist dialectics is Badiou’s own reading of the intellectual history of the French left within the text of *The Rational Kernel*. He speaks of



the reception of Marx and Hegel in France, and is critical of two broad framings of those thinkers. The first comes from Kojève, passing through the surrealists, Lacan and Sartre. It valorises a subjective romanticist idealism in Hegel, which is ultimately extended into Marxism. Under the sign of the master-slave dialectic alienation become the central category and the tragedy of the Third International underscores a retreat into bourgeois individualism (Badiou, 2011: 11-12). The second is Althusser's structural Marxism, which Badiou argues severs the link between Marx and Hegel entirely as positivist social scientists seek to secure their own identity as such ("the apolitical Marx of the professors"). It is then the Chinese Cultural Revolution and May '68 that make a reconnection between Marx and Hegel possible. As Badiou notes, "the counter current was inevitable the moment when the historical horizon shifted at its base". The effects of the Second World War, the perception of Stalinist Russia, disillusionment with the PCF connected to May '68 and the Algerian War of Independence, combined with the contrast with events unfolding in China and across the developing world as colonial rule was ended, all served to force activists and intellectuals to pick a side, presenting them with new options, and provoking a ferment of political ideas (Badiou, 2011: 13-14).

It is though in the commentary on Zhang Shiyang's *The Rational Kernel of Hegel's Philosophy*, from 1972, which is translated and reproduced in Badiou's book, that we see the origins of the dialectical opposition between truth and knowledge. Whilst Zhang reflects at some length on the process of "the incessant concretization of the abstract towards the concrete", a necessary element of that is the conditioning of truth, and the requirement of internal contradictions as the underlying mechanism (Badiou, 2011: 21). It is this law of contradiction that becomes most important for the development of Badiou's work. He notes that identity changes itself "in difference", as being comes as excess and

destruction, always bringing a division into two. Truth is that which exceeds the structures it negates and it has no identity other than difference. Paralleling the later connection of truth, subject and event, Badiou treats being, difference and truth together:

“Truth is what has *no identity other than from a difference*, hence the being of all things is the process of its division into two” (Badiou, 2011: 60).

### **2.3. Developing the Dialectic: Events and Periodisation**

The ideas that are touched upon in *The Rational Kernel* have to wait until *Theory of the Subject* (2009b), first published in 1982, before they become fully systematised by Badiou. Whilst the earlier text comprises an exegesis on Hegel in the main, *Theory of the Subject* introduces revolutionary events as the central category. His methodological approach sees the simultaneous analysis of historical sequences and a philosophical interrogation of the political subject. The reasoning that underpins this approach again draws upon a critical analysis of the French left, at the heart of which is the dialectic.

Expanding on his discussion from *The Rational Kernel* of the manner in which materialism and idealism have been opposed to one another in orthodox Marxist theory, Badiou argues that the relationship between the two was vaguely defined by Engels at best, and therefore Badiou seeks to examine its conceptual roots more thoroughly, in order to further elucidate his own understanding of the dialectical movement between them (Badiou, 2009b: 183-184). His ultimate target on this occasion though is the dominance of structuralism and post-structuralism within the French academy, which has displaced the centrality of the subject (Badiou, 2009b: 188). He therefore, with a wry grin one can imagine, proceeds to provide a ‘genealogy’ of sorts for this attack on the subject.

Badiou concurs with Engels that the ruling class privileges idealism as it “subordinates nature to the concept” – engineers over assembly line workers, intellectual labour over manual labour, etc. (Badiou, 2009b: 185). Badiou recognises though that such an analysis appears crude, ‘vulgar’ even, but he argues that it is born-out on the left itself. Whilst Marxism aims at the dissolution of the distinctions between “city and countryside, industry and agriculture, intellectual and manual”, it is more often than not forgotten “with the onset of the old age of conservatism”, as the “irascible materialism of one’s political youth” disappears (Badiou, 2009b: 184-185). This holds true for parties and movements as it does for individuals, wherein a kind of bourgeois leftism takes root (Badiou, 2009b: 186).

Taking a step back from standard Marxist polemics against bourgeois idealism though, Badiou is keen to highlight the interrelationship between materialism and idealism. He notes that “the first materialism of our era” was that of the ‘rising bourgeoisie’, which launched vicious attacks on religion via means of the new Newtonian science. The ‘bourgeois secularism’ that is “established through the state” following the French Revolution is not however materialist, but instead it involves a kind of refined and regenerated ‘spiritualism’ rooted in a new scientific idealism, “centred on Man, and no longer on God”, which in Badiou’s words demonstrates how “materialism organizes the assault, not the takeover; the uprising, not the repression” (Badiou, 2009b: 186). Materialism therefore always depends upon the existence of a concomitant tradition of idealism, which it wages war against (Bosteels, 2011: 46). This sees its expression in brutal eruptions of violence:

“The history of materialism finds the principle of its periodization in its adversary. Making a system out of nothing else than what it seeks to bring down and destroy, puffed up in latent fits of rage, this aim is barely philosophical. It gives colour, in often barbarous inflections, to the impatience of destruction” (Badiou, 2009b: 186).

The new idealism that takes root in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries is characterised by Badiou as an ‘average Kantianism’. It relies upon a humanism that places the subject and consciousness as the centrepiece of experience and the point of access to transcendental truth. The struggle that then marks late-modernity and brings a new counterpart materialism is made possible by a division within idealism between ‘Hegelian immanence’ and the Kantian ‘transcendental’. The task of the materialism that follows the ‘death of God’ is to “undo Man”. Whereas previously the assault on religion had based itself in nature, which it could oppose to divine grace and miracles, there is now though an absence of such sureties:

“Taking its [nature’s] place is the historical becoming of the world, in which the class position turns out to divide humankind and there is not one simple term capable of functioning as the centre of either experience or truth” (Badiou, 2009b: 187).

This anti-humanism comes to characterise Althusser’s structural Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and the work of Foucault. Language is taken to be prior to experience, and as a result the Cartesian subject can be displaced (Badiou, 2009b: 187-188). What Badiou calls ‘linguistic idealism’ or ‘idealinguistry’ performs this operation via “the description of vast discursive configurations that characterize the entire mental and practical process of

an era” (Badiou, 2009b: 188). The structural power of language comes to displace the function of God and Man for the modern idealism, and only language can mediate the subjective experience of a fluid real (Badiou, 2009b: 189). As Bosteels notes though, it is “only the materialist tendency in philosophy” that is “capable of recognizing the logic of internalized conflict itself” (Bosteels, 2011: 48). This is why Badiou argues that a “materialism centred upon a theory of the subject” is essential if the predetermination of discourse is to be escaped, and subjective access to the Marxist political real – the existence of class conflict and oppression – is to be made possible (Badiou, 2009b: 189).

It is important to note though that in *Theory of the Subject* Badiou is not seeking a return to a kind of Nineteenth Century humanism. The ‘subject’ is not identified with the individual human subject, but instead, he argues that “the political subject is the class party” (Badiou, 2009b: 243). Badiou argues that there is a more foundational dialectic than the contradiction between opposites, as is found in Hegel. Instead there is a dialectic between ‘pure being’ and its ‘being-placed’. We have pure identity, as-difference (as was discussed in *The Rational Kernel*) contrasted against the “structured space to which it belongs, between its being and the Whole”. It is this contradiction that precedes any category. The essential contrary of the proletariat is not then the bourgeoisie, but the entire ‘bourgeois world’, of which the proletariat is a member, and which furnishes the antagonism through which the being of the proletariat can emerge and seek a re-placement – communism – which dissolves the very basis of class division (Badiou, 2009b: 7-8). The communist party therefore has a vital function in that it makes possible a subjective encounter with the (new) real through the event (Badiou, 2009b: 246-247).

Badiou discusses in this regard how the lessons that Lenin draws from the crushing of the Paris Commune, its weaknesses and failures, is embedded in the ‘Leninist Party’ with its unique tactics and modes of organization, which are manifested in the October Revolution of 1917. As such, 1917 makes real or ‘completes’ the Commune, but it is a process that operates according to what is unique in both as opposed to a causal progression (Badiou, 2009b: 46-47). Badiou labels this the ‘discrepant double scission’, meaning that the novelty of both situations – 1917 and the Commune – denies their linear periodisation, and that they give one-another meaning as events on account of their unique qualities as opposed to a shared identity (Badiou, 2009b: 48). As Wright notes, if 1917 were “causally deducible” from the Commune “it would not provide the basis for the strong novelty of the Leninist sequence” (Wright, 2013: 194).

The historical periodisation of leftist revolutions is therefore important in that rather than following a long causal chain, they provide a means of historical memory being deployed to transcend present struggles. Wright perhaps puts it best when he states that “periodization enacts a recursive ‘diagonal’ between two revolts that has the effect of ‘completing’ one period, and simultaneously opening up a new one” (Wright, 2013: 191). Throughout, what Badiou calls ‘destruction’ and ‘recomposition’ functions as the essential engine of subjectivisation in history, and the mechanism of meaningful change (Badiou, 2009b: 244). The communist party therefore exists as a vessel “of its own termination” due to the encounter with a new political real that it brings. The example that Badiou uses is that of the relationship between Stalinism and Maoism, which he sees as successive stages in the movement towards communism. The communist party operates as “the discourse of the Master, of the State [Stalinism], but it is also that of the hysteric, in reality insurrectionary and following the pirouettes of the moment [Maoism]” (Badiou, 2009b:

246-247). The party is therefore able to dissolve itself through mass-action and bring a new politics (Badiou, 2009b: 146-147). In more Lacanian language, Badiou describes this as the event coming to being as the real displacing the One (the structured ‘Whole’ mentioned above), instead of unfolding being in the direction of the ‘imaginary’ (which is itself subordinated to the symbolic order of the One) (Badiou, 2009b: 244).

#### **2.4. Rupture and the State**

In *Being and Event* (2007a) Badiou seeks to more fully interrogate the relationship between the One/Whole and the ‘evental’ rupture that brings change. This becomes a means through which he can critique the centrality of the party-state, and in that regard the book demonstrates a departure from *Theory of the Subject*, which remains wedded to the communist party’s capture of the institutions of state as the main vehicle of revolutionary change.

*Being and Event* is underpinned by an ontology of *absolute* multiplicity. Badiou claims that we cannot have access to the ‘pure’ multiple – being-qua-being – but instead we have access to being through its presentation to us in a structured manner, as collections of multiples. The One does not exist; because any object that is presented to us is fundamentally multiple, the One is only ever a consistency of presentation – an appearance. From this starting point Badiou can then go onto explain change that marks a radical departure from a preceding order of consistent presentation (Badiou, 2007a: 93-94).

Situations – and Badiou uses the term in a literal sense, meaning any manner of the multiple kinds of situations that we find ourselves in and encounter moment-to-moment – are presented to us as coherent and structured – what Badiou calls ‘the count-as-one’.

However, because of the multiple nature of being, the count-as-one is inherently unstable – its consistency of presentation is always susceptible to change through the rupture of the event. Situations can then only ever be (spatially and temporally) limited configurations. Because situations are multiplicities there is a necessary void (that which evades the count-as-one) at the heart of their ontological being (“the situational anxiety of the void”). In order to maintain coherence within a situation, the count-as-one must ward-off the “catastrophe of presentation which would be its encounter with its own void” (Badiou, 2007a: 93).

What in a sense reinforces the count-as-one and allows multiple being to maintain its consistency of presentation is a ‘metastructure’ (Badiou, 2007a: 94-95). The metastructure performs a kind of ‘policing’ operation to prevent the appearance of the void, ordering the relations between multiples – what Badiou calls ‘the second count’ (Badiou, 2007a: 93). Presentation therefore requires sustained re-presentation in order to verify its own existence. Situations therefore need this overarching metastructure to keep reproducing their unitary being. Badiou terms this metastructure the ‘state of the situation’ (Badiou, 2007a: 95). When Badiou speaks of the ‘state of the situation’, on a fundamental level he is speaking of ordering knowledge of a situation, but following his Maoist influences, he also uses the term to refer to a specific ‘state of the situation’, which is the institutional state and the hegemonic position it has in political thought.

In the following chapter I will go into greater depth in detailing the omissions that characterise Badiou’s reading of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism. Initially though, it is important to note that on a more general level, Badiou’s Maoism has involved a critique of state power through a fidelity to the Cultural Revolution. Doing so for Badiou means



highlighting what he takes to be the contradictions and failures of the Cultural Revolution, which he puts down to a kind of reactionary backlash and betrayal, laying much of the blame squarely at Mao's feet in *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010). In *Being and Event*, he also notes Mao's own admittance as to the 'obscene' persistence of the state, that, "after twenty-five years in power and ten years of the Cultural Revolution's ferocious tumult... not much had changed after all". For Badiou, reflection on the failures of the Cultural Revolution can only strengthen scepticism of the party-state as a vehicle of political change – "that there is little of strategic signification in such a change" (Badiou, 2007a: 110). Revolutionary politics should not then be about seizing the state and expanding its remit:

"Rather than a warrior beneath the walls of the State, a political activist is a patient watchman of the void instructed by the event, for it is only when grappling with the event that the state blinds itself to its own mastery. There the activist constructs the means to sound, if only for an instant the site of the unrepresentable, and the means to be thenceforth faithful to the proper name that, afterwards, he or she will have been able to give to – or hear, one cannot decide – this non-place of place, the void" (Badiou, 2007a: 111).

Badiou's changing orientation to the party-state can best be understood through his movement away from the UCFML, which was modelled on the party and towards the Organisation Politique, centred in the factories. This change in political involvement/affiliation mirrors a philosophical development within Badiou's writing, moving work away from a preoccupation with the destruction and recomposition of the party-state, and towards the radical subtraction of the "impossible" event from the

prevailing order of political possibility within the state of the situation (Bosteels, 2011: 238, Pluth, 2010: 167-168).

Badiou finds in the Organisation Politique and its association with the factories the generic category of the “worker”, which has a more contemporary correlate in the “immigrant” (Hallward, 2003: 235, Pluth, 2010: 168). By summoning the universality of the worker or the immigrant we pull the rug from under identity politics and notions of victimhood, which concede too much to the ordering (and divisive) powers of the governing state of the situation (Pluth, 2010: 167, Toscano, 2006: 352).

Instead, anti-party mass-politics is premised on the rejection of a representative model of politics, or as Pluth phrases it: “not so much demanding freedom... as presupposing it, and actively creating a new, free present” (Pluth, 2010: 167). A political party concedes the initiative to the state of the situation, using established referents to frame dissidence. It is in essence only the eruption of political “absurdity” into the normalcy of a staid order that can summon the generic real (Bosteels, 2011: 238). This is because what is forbidden remains under the nominating power of the state. Transgression in this sense is an empty gesture – the revolution must be total and for all or not at all (Bosteels, 2011: 237).

It is this primacy of revolt which Badiou takes from Maoism. A state of permanent revolution persists through which the generic reality of class struggle surges up and meets reactionary responses against the radical rupture of the event and its necessary revolutionary terror (Toscano, 2006: 353). The starting point for politics is ultimately the site of the excess of state power, which is summoned by the event (Bosteels, 2011: 29). Beginning with his early *Peut-on Penser la Politique?*, Badiou praises an essentially

Jacobin mode of subjectivity that meets its fullest realisation in Maoism after proceeding via Marxism; one that is a “hysterical symptom of the social” (Hallward, 2003: 357).

What Badiou takes from the failure of Marxism in *Peut-on Penser la Politique* and develops most fully in later works is that the essence of the political can only be “nonprogrammatic”. For subjective mobilisation to be effective it must be “indifferent to the logic of recognition and re-presentation as such” (Hallward, 2003: 41 & 226-227). The idea that anyone can occupy the space of politics outside of the party-state is thus essential to the later Badiou (Hallward, 2003: 225).

The point from which the state (of the situation) may be overturned is what Badiou terms the ‘evental site’ – “Every radical transformational action originates *in a point*, which, inside a situation, is an evental site” (Badiou, 2007a: 176). Not all situations contain evental sites though, and those which do not Badiou calls ‘natural’ in that they involve a staid ‘equilibrium’ of presentation and representation. Those that do contain evental sites Badiou describes as ‘historical’. They possess an element or elements which challenges their re-presentation as a coherent One. It is through ‘historical localization’ via evental sites that change takes place, and a new form of being is presented to us (Badiou, 2007a: 177).

This localisation takes place through the event, which requires a subjective intervention through an act of ‘naming’: “only an *interpretive intervention* can declare that an event *is* presented in a situation” (Badiou, 2007a: 181). Events therefore require subjects who name them and are *faithful* to them. The subject “reworks the situation through its tenacious fidelity to that nomination”, undoing the re-presentation of the situation. This process

constitutes ‘a *being*’ of politics in the purest form, coming as an excess to the situation (Badiou, 2007a: 358). What makes an event an event is its truth function, that it brings an abrupt departure from the knowledge that persists in the state of the situation – it is ‘generic’ truth in that it “comes into being through the subjects who proclaim it and, in doing so, constitute themselves as subjects in their fidelity to the event”, it is therefore available to all, the only condition of membership to the community of faithful subjects being the act of fidelity itself, which is by its very nature extended out into all of its potential consequences (Hallward, 2003: xxvi-xxvii). An act of reactionary dogmatism would be the attachment to one limited, multiple expression of the event. For example, the xenophobic reactions to minorities that have often accompanied revolutionary periods, in which the right seeks to apportion blame for an economic disaster on a particular grouping, whilst the leftist revolutionary response is to seek redress at the level of the capitalist system.

## **2.5. The Event is Not Miraculous**

Daniel Bensaïd has argued that Badiou’s event is akin to a ‘miracle’ – a “negative theology” – which depends upon the grace-like fidelity of the subject (Bensaïd, 2004: 101). Because the event is aleatory and cannot be predicted, it comes about retrospectively through “the sovereign naming of its existence and the fidelity to the truth which comes to light in it” (Bensaïd, 2004: 97). Further:

“By refusing to venture into the dense thickets of real history, into the social and historical determination of events, Badiou’s notion of the political tips over into a wholly imaginary dimension: this is politics made tantamount to an act of levitation, reduced to a series of unconditioned events and ‘sequences’ whose

exhaustion or end remain forever mysterious. As a result, history and the event become miraculous in Spinoza's sense – a miracle is 'an event the cause of which cannot be explained'" (Bensaïd, 2004: 98).

Oliver Marchart concurs, arguing that we are presented with a circular relationship between "subject, decision and event", divorced from a fixed point (Marchart, 2007: 124). However, following Bosteels, the utility of this lack of a fixed foundation can only be understood fully through a continued dialectical framing of the arguments in *Being and Event*. The event, as a concept, does not necessarily lead to an abandonment of the dialectic. Evental rupture does not so much mark an absolute split between situation and event, but instead, Badiou remains committed to thinking the dialectic as 'scission' instead of as a totalising synthesis (Bosteels, 2004: 160). In thinking the emergence of the new *within* the situation (faithful subject and event), that necessitates thinking the old within the situation (the count-as-one, the state), and the two can only be thought from within the situation (the second count, the evental site and naming) (Bosteels, 2004: 152). The key dialectical relationship that comes to mark *Being and Event* then is between 'void' and 'excess' (Bosteels, 2004: 156). For Bosteels, there is therefore a "divided articulation between the normal order of being and the truth of a haphazard event". This, he argues, "constitutes the rational kernel of the dialectic according to Badiou" (Bosteels, 2004: 151).

Further, for Bosteels, if Badiou was to subordinate evental rupture and sequencing to an overarching historical telos, or any number of fixed referents in language and experience, then the ability to conceptualise a departure from a constraining order of knowledge would

be greatly diminished (Bosteels, 2004: 150 & 155).<sup>4</sup> Change can take place within a situation without being transitive to it through the event. The examples that Badiou gives are far from ‘miraculous’, but instead they speak to the multiplicity that comprises a situation, but which is suppressed by the second count, surging forth as an excess: “a certain modulation in a symphony by Haydn, a particular command in the Paris Commune” (Badiou, 2004a: 101).

It is important to note as well that within *Being and Event* Badiou is mindful of the counter-movements and conflicts that might characterise fidelity – it is not a univocal movement. He argues that “different criteria can exist which define different fidelities.” As such, he gives the example of Stalinists and Trotskyists both declaring their fidelity to the event of October 1917, but then turning their weapons on one-another (Badiou, 2007a: 233-234). The struggle to name the event sits at the heart of broader political sequences, and the event’s rupture is interpreted in the light of them. Harking back to Badiou’s discussion of materialism and idealism in *Theory of the Subject* we can note that the being of the revolutionary political event is found in conflict, division, difference, and opposition, which is then universalised as a new maxim for a community of faithful subjects. It is worth quoting from Quentin Meillassoux’s discussion of *Being and Event* at some length here:

“...a truth, being the patient result of a series of local inquiries under a wagered hypothesis of an undecidable event, cannot exist outside the concrete history of subjects. But how is it that such truths can be at once eternal, and yet the

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<sup>4</sup> There are though potential problems in relation to universalism and ‘generic truth’, as well as the use of fixed political referents in Badiou’s work, which I shall discuss over the course of the subsequent chapters.

bearers of history, the only genuine history? It is because a truth is the bearer, by right, of an infinite number of consequences: a set of inquiries therefore, by right, inexhaustible, and capable of being extended to historical moments in profoundly different contexts. In other words, a truth is the bearer of theoretical movements that form among themselves a historicity both profound and discontinuous. This is why an event always produces, in the minds of those who decide to be faithful to it, a retrospective genealogy of precursors. A precursor, as we know, is something of which we know only later that it came before. There is thus no novelty that does not try to forge a previously unknown historical depth, by bringing together a series of ideas previously dispersed in common consciousness, in order to herald a new lineage of the present. There is no truth, as new as it may be, which does not claim to be realizing an idea that was not already germinal in a largely unknown, or misinterpreted past” (Meillassoux, 2011: 3-4).

## **2.6. Dialectical Materialism: The Heroic Form of Politics**

Badiou himself has spoken in an interview with Bruno Bosteels about the importance of situating rupture within a broader ‘politics of emancipation’ which he is faithful to above all else. Therefore, the question of what begins and ends – or the causality that Bensaïd seeks – must be understood in that context. Badiou is particularly wary of any attempt to enclose politics within a pessimism that seems to characterise so much contemporary ‘critical’ scholarship. To speak of the ‘retreat of the political’ and the end of “the heroic form of politics”, post-’68 and following the end of ‘actually-existing communism’, involves a surrender and a denial of a more pragmatic long-term vision of emancipation. Nor is it a new phenomenon. “Thinkers and militants” in the Nineteenth Century, for example, wrestled with pessimism towards the closure of “the sequence of the French

Revolution” before Marx made possible a radical movement, a new sequence (Bosteels, 2011: 292-293). Pessimism can lead to a closure of the political in that an inevitable state of affairs is accepted, and/or we move to constantly imagining the conditions of emergence for a new politics without realising we are still engaged in many of the same ongoing struggles. We then have to realise that what ends is situated as part of a multiplicity of revolutionary forms (Bosteels, 2011: 293).

This emphasis on a multiplicity of revolutionary forms is important for there is a tendency within Badiou’s work for ‘generic truth’ to be related to a singular Marxist-Leninist-Maoist revolutionary lineage, and as a result the conflation of the subject with a kind of persistent proletarian subjectivity. It is an issue that deserves a significant amount of attention in the subsequent chapters because of its implications for how we think about fidelity and change (rupture, sequencing, periodisation, immanence) in Badiou’s philosophy. Wright argues that Badiou’s unceasing concern with the possibility of novelty through revolutionary agency makes him best placed to tackle the over-determining structures that are said to characterise our era: neoliberalism, globalisation, imperialism, etc. (Wright, 2013: 18). Such a project is however potentially threatened if it is chained to over-determining structures of its own. As a result, it is particularly important that we give a good amount of attention to *Logics of Worlds* (2009a), which arguably more than any other of Badiou’s texts concerns itself with the ‘macro-scale’ of politics.

*Logics of Worlds* provides a systematised account of the political struggles that define the contemporary era, alongside what is arguably Badiou’s most developed philosophy of the event. At the heart of this project is Badiou’s critique of ‘democratic materialism’: his term for that which he argues opposes his own approach of ‘dialectical materialism’. In



democratic materialism, he argues, “there are only bodies and languages, there is no truth” (Badiou, 2009a: 421). Both postmodern and liberal-capitalist ontologies are characterised by democratic materialism.<sup>5</sup> ‘Materialism’, because they commit themselves to the injunction: “Live without Idea” (Badiou, 2009a: 511), in that they recognise “the objective existence of bodies alone” (Badiou, 2009a: 1). There is a pragmatic focus on the human species and the imperatives of day-to-day living in a settled world through which democratic materialism divorces itself from ‘eternal’ and ‘ideal’ truth that allows the subject to suture itself into present existence “under the sign of the trace of what changes” – the event (Badiou, 2009a: 511).

Language is the terrain on which this absolute identification with the individuated human body reproduces itself through a democratic relativism. To explain why this is the case we have to briefly return to *Being and Event*. Within that text Badiou discussed ‘the encyclopaedia of the situation’, which sets the bounds of accepted language under the state of the situation – what can and cannot be said. If something cannot be said in this language then it is de-legitimised and pushed to the margins – it might as well not exist as far as the state is concerned (Badiou, 2007a: 328-329). The encyclopaedia is contrasted against the truth-event, which comes as an ‘outside’ to this existing body of knowledge (Badiou, 2004a). In *Logics of Worlds* however, Badiou seeks to provide a more nuanced account of the interaction between the two – encyclopaedia and event – drawing out the *immanent* function of the event as a measure of change *within*. It is not surprising then that Badiou

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<sup>5</sup> Badiou’s examples include: contemporary capitalism in which the individual is shaped by bodily desire, excess and finitude; the arts in which choreographers, painters and filmmakers concern themselves with a ‘body art,’ in which the body is the central medium of embodied living (“intimacy... nudity... ordeals”); postmodern notions of tolerance and rights (‘bioethics’ and ‘biopolitics’); and ‘human rights’. Cf. BADIOU, A. 2009a. *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, London, Continuum. PP: 1,2 & 511.

makes a more concretely defined encyclopaedia – ‘democratic materialism’ – the central motif around which to structure his re-theorisation of evental change, moving away from what is by his own admission an abstract and ill-defined ‘evental site’, which depended too much on the ‘naming’ intervention of the subject (Badiou, 2009a: 361).

Democratic materialism is thus reproduced on a dominant terrain of language in that the subject becomes an effect of determining structure in postmodernism, and a cultural and political relativism takes hold in human rights discourse and democratic legal structures (Badiou, 2009a: 2, Wright, 2013: 147). These are themes that appear in *Ethics* (2001) but are developed much further in *Logics of Worlds*.<sup>6</sup> When Badiou is speaking of ‘languages’ he is not then just implying the reduction to the text, which we see in so much contemporary work across the social sciences, although that is nonetheless an important element, but he is also seeking to draw out a broader set of underlying philosophical assumptions.

There is a juridical relativism in which the ‘plurality of languages’ is protected. Different forms of identity come to have an equal status: “everything and everyone deserves to be recognized and protected by the law” (Badiou, 2009a: 2). What is important to note about this tolerance though is that it imposes a limit and that it protects a right to intervene to police that limit. The ‘rule is brought down’ both literally and metaphorically when bodies display an ‘excess of language’, seeking to regulate other bodies and languages according to a new maxim (Badiou, 2009a: 2-3). Relativism seeks to foreclose the possibility of militancy for a novel truth, and ultimately the possibility of change. As Badiou notes in

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<sup>6</sup> In *Ethics* the targets of Badiou’s polemics are Levinasian ethics and human rights discourse, specifically. Cf. BADIOU, A. 2001. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, London, Verso.

*Ethics*, this logic extends into all manner of humanitarian concerns. They are “subjected neither to empirical considerations nor to the examination of situations”, but instead are judged against a legal a priori, or quasi-theological injunctions as to how one must behave towards the other, and guarantee their rights to difference (Badiou, 2001: 8 & 22-23).

Badiou’s response in *Ethics* is to advocate a form of situational thinking premised on fidelity to the event, with that which suppresses or occludes fidelity understood as ‘evil’ (Badiou, 2001). It is of course a controversial stance to take and Bosteels notes that: “a procedure of truth would in and of itself do violence to the truth – meaning, of course, to an other truth, which is also the truth of the other, and not the truth as defined by Badiou” (Bosteels, 2011: 178). It is a position which Badiou does not entirely deviate from in *Logics of Worlds* wherein he scornfully dismisses the notion that this ‘aristocratism’ of fidelity to the event is problematic (Badiou, 2009a: 512). The function of partisan truth remains vital to the later book, one that the focus on bodies and languages in the contemporary order of democratic materialism seeks to suppress. Badiou’s own injunction then is that: “*There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths*” (Badiou, 2009a: 4). Despite the conceptual hegemony of democratic materialism, for Badiou, it cannot then evade the puncture of truths supported by subjects, as Pluth notes: “the subject is the presence of an exception to the reign of opinion, and to the exclusive existence of speaking bodies” (Pluth, 2010: 123).

It is truth that distinguishes dialectical materialism from democratic materialism, and the subject is central, as Badiou states: “what is a singular subject? It is the active (or corporeal, or organic) bearer of the dialectical overcoming of simple materialism” (Badiou, 2009a: 45). Further: “*A subject is an indirect and creative relation between an event and a*

*world*” (Badiou, 2009a: 79). So what then is meant by a world and how does it relate to dialectical materialism?

## 2.7. Being-There

In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou moves to clearly define being by its appearing (‘being-there-in-a-world’), as opposed to its ‘being as such’ (being-qua-being). The first “whose principle is to consist” differs to the second, which relates to the pure mathematical multiples and count-as-one elucidated in *Being and Event* (Badiou, 2009a: 39). Moving away from that in *Being and Event* that may have lent itself towards a reading of the event as miraculous, and an absolute break with a situation, an event now becomes a measure of change in a situation, or ‘world’ as they are subsequently described (Badiou, 2009a, Pluth, 2010: 68). Rather than the focus being on the metastructure of the state of the situation ordering the count-as-one, the ordering structure of a world now exists on a lateral plane with the multiples that appear within it. Badiou describes these ordering structures as ‘transcendental’.<sup>7</sup> It is misleading because their most important characteristic is that they immanently order worlds through the relations between beings. The transcendental does not though dictate appearance – the world is multiple still like the situation in his previous books, and diverse forms appear - but instead the transcendental is a marker of “degrees of

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<sup>7</sup> With regards the movement towards emphasising a lateral ordering, Badiou notes: “Perspicacious readers (namely Desanti, Deleuze, Nancy and Lyotard) quickly brought to my notice that I was framing the ontological definition of ‘what happens’ both from below and from above. From below, by positing the existence, required by every event, of an event-site, whose formal structure I rather laboriously delineated. From above, by demanding that every event receive a name. One could then say, on the one hand, that there was in fact a ‘worldly’ structure of the event (its site, summoning the void of every situation), and on the other, a rather unclear transcendental structure (the name, attributed by an anonymous subject)”. Cf. BADIOU, A. 2009a. *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, London, Continuum. Pg. 361.

identity or difference among a multiple and itself, or between a being-there and other beings” (Badiou, 2009a: 102).

Philosophically then, there are two principle elements to being-there: ‘differing from itself’ and ‘differing from other beings of the same world’. Being-there must be distinct from being-qua-being so that the situation of being is not ‘enveloped’ by reduction to a mathematical absolute, which would prevent the latter from appearing within a world as a distinct form, through which its being-qua-being as a mathematical multiple must still be retained (Badiou, 2009a: 117). The ‘logic’ of worlds relates to the ‘coding’ of the differences between multiples ‘world by world’, and crucially, there is a ‘plurality of worlds’ (Badiou, 2009a: 114 & 117). Worlding is therefore a process which is fundamentally ad-hoc. It does not operate according to formal rules that can be transferred, but the logics of worlds are unique to those worlds, or as Badiou would say ‘localized’ to them (Badiou, 2009a: 102 & 114). Being-there fundamentally means to be localized, “a being-among-others” (Wright, 2013: 65).

Now this is where the dialectical element figures, for as Pluth notes, the subject must have “one foot in the world and one foot out of it” (Pluth, 2010: 124). There must be a truth external to knowledge (in a Platonic manner) for an event to effect a world. If being is both ontologically distinct and a relational entity as a multiple within a world, then in order for truth to effect the world it must move immanently within it whilst also puncturing it. This is the point at which what Badiou describes as ‘bodies’ feature, for he notes that: “truths are required to appear bodily... and to do so over again” (Badiou, 2009a: 46). Bodies might be thought of as “the worldly dimension of the subject” (Pluth, 2010: 124), such as the communist party or a sequence of musical works (Badiou, 2009a: 46-47). A subject

then “formalizes the effects of a body in accordance with a certain logic, whether productive or counterproductive”. In the case of a musical sequence, Badiou discusses how within classical compositions (specifically those of the early-twentieth century, ‘Great Viennese Composers’) we see the emergence of a ‘subjectivated artistic body’, which produces novel ‘systemic effects of rupture’ – new forms of intonation, narration, rapidity/brevity, sequencing, and overall unity (Badiou, 2009a: 46).

To develop Badiou’s example of the communist party – particularly being mindful of his declaration in *Theory of the Subject* that “the political subject is the class party”, as noted above (Badiou, 2009b: 243) – we might think of the party not as bringing an essential and unavoidable encounter that provokes a re-placement of the subject, but instead we can think of the manner in which a logic that unfolds through the corporeal form of the party brings different embodied effects: “either a truth (faithful subject), a denial of truth (reactive subject) or an occultation of truth (obscure subject)” (Badiou, 2009a: 47). We can therefore take into account a multiplicity of party forms, thinking about how they display a particular mode of embodied being – for example, the Chinese Communist Party in union with the Nationalists, during the principal years of the Cultural Revolution, or post-Cultural Revolution as the ruling class of a capitalist superpower.

Bodies are then best thought of as material supports for subjective forms (Badiou, 2009a: 47). They are not identical to individual physical human bodies. Badiou does not believe that a perceptive human subject should be the measure of experience and what is knowable. To refute such idealism, he refers to Meillassoux’s argument that the fossil record (palaeontology, etc.) negates the need for any world with its “degrees of identity and difference” to depend upon “any ‘subject’ whatsoever, or even on the existence of the

human animal” (Badiou, 2009a: 118-119). It is important though to emphasise that when Badiou speaks of ‘bodies’ he is not implying a material causality. They are not ‘natural’ or ‘socially constructed’ forms, but crucially, they represent the material aspect of the subject which *exceeds* the taxonomic order of a world. Bodies demonstrate effects in a world as the subject ‘carries’ a truth. As Wright notes, due to the contingent nature of the evental rupture the subject has “no recognised rule of composition”, which might be transferred between cases or subjected to a positivist analysis (Wright, 2013: 150-151).

## 2.8. Structure

A significant development of the different “manners of being faithful to an event”, mentioned in *Being and Event* (Badiou, 2007a: 234), is the acknowledgment of different subjective forms, noted above: active, reactive and obscure (Badiou, 2009a: 47). Whilst Badiou notes in *Being and Event* that “different criteria can exist which define different fidelities” (Badiou, 2007a: 233), the emphasis is still more on the singular faithful subject.

There is though, another element within *Being and Event* that prefigures the new arguments in *Logics of Worlds*, namely, that subjects may not always be aware of the truth they reproduce – an “indiscernible part of their existence” (Badiou, 2009a: 340). This is important, for if Badiou is not committed to a humanist understanding of the *individual* subject, then it becomes more straightforward to increasingly emphasise the situational and relational aspects of its being. This is not to reduce the subject to causal structures that are external to it, but it is Badiou’s way of relating structure and contingency to one-another. He wants to be able to show that, in the words of Wright: “Any dialectic of necessity both drains history of contingency and absorbs revolution into evolution” (Wright, 2013: 72).

There is not a necessary ‘progressive’ form of politics, and nor is the only issue the institutional state’s power of counter-nomination, but instead, active subjectivity produces a truth, and it is followed in order by ‘denial’ and ‘occultation’, and those latter two may support one-another. Badiou, to support his case, cites the activism in the 1960s and 1970s that opened the space for a new generation of French academics to denounce militant left-wing politics (Badiou, 2009a: 62-63). A more contemporary example, as discussed by Žižek would be the manner in which charity and altruism are co-opted by capital – what he describes as ‘liberal communism’, embodied by the like of George Soros and Bill Gates: monopoly capitalists lauded for their philanthropy (Žižek, 2008: 22). We could take this a stage back and also speak of the manner in which Silicon Valley emerged out of the ‘60s counter-culture in California, with the long-haired and bearded hippie engineers at the Stanford Research Institute giving birth to the internet, and behemoths such as Google and Apple that have commercialised liberal communism on a mass-scale.

Problems do though potentially arise in describing the relational worlding of the subject, in that we reproduce that very worlding, or “its reduction to a ‘fact’ that entirely nullifies it”, as Wright notes (Wright, 2013: 162). Such an operation, which I will discuss in Chapter Four in relation to Tiananmen, represents an occultation that can serve a reactionary politics. Howard Caygill phrases the problem excellently when he notes that:

“...avoiding the conceptual unification of ‘*a* Resistance’ and the empirical dispersion of several historically discrete resistances requires an understanding of conceptuality that permits consistency without imposing unity. The ‘concept’ of resistance then exemplifies a conceptuality that includes within it a counter-movement to both unification and dispersal” (Caygill, 2013: 7).



In describing ‘democratic materialism’ or ‘liberal communism’ we have to be wary that we do not grant it an overarching power over our own discourse. ‘Neoliberalism’ presents just such an example. The term has come to function as something of a ‘catch-all’ signifier for an often quite disparate array of processes. Employing the term ‘neoliberalism’ can then involve, if we are not careful, a certain Eurocentrism in reducing social relations the world over to the conditions of Western late capitalism. That neoliberalism emerged from a specific set of historically documented economic practices and regimes of knowledge in the United States and Western Europe, which depended upon free access to Dickensian factory/work houses and peasant agriculture in the ‘periphery’ is often overlooked in asserting a commonality under globalisation.

The notion of the ‘post-political’, which I discuss in Chapter Four, is perhaps the ultimate example of this problem in that it presents a terrain of political contestation devoid of any unique markers of identity: regional complexities, gender differences, class differences, race, religion, etc. We have to ask then, what are the specific theoretical tools that Badiou gives us to fix the over-determination of these macro-scale explanations, to draw out the conflict and political stakes, and carve out a space for resistance?

## **2.9. Writing the Event**

At what level, using Badiou’s philosophical concepts, might we begin to examine fidelity to the event and meaningful change? If there is not a common rule of event formation to be found, as is argued in *Logics of Worlds* – that the process is fundamentally ad-hoc – then we can only focus on specific historical cases. If we were to return to the notion of presentation in *Being and Event*, then that might encourage us to think about the precise mechanisms of re-presentation that might be involved in sustaining an event as such – the

level of an epistemology. However, Badiou's criticism of the hegemony of language as a site of cultural and political reproduction in *Logics of Worlds* is indeed powerful, and across his various writings and statements discussed in this chapter, it becomes apparent that novelty is not to be found at the level of a staid terrain of linguistic and cultural reproduction, that we have to look for 'something more'.

In theorising the emergence of political novelty though, Badiou does provide us with some tools for thinking about the point of entry for a more thorough academic investigation of specific events and truth-procedures. In *Ethics* there is something of a framework for thinking about how the subjective 'encounter' with the event may be sutured into existing networks of discourse – more of a fit with the immanent movements of the event within a world, which Badiou subsequently discusses in *Logics of Worlds*. In *Ethics* the event is described as an "ethic of the Real", which I think draws out an element that is perhaps missing from the notion of fidelity, namely, the wider embodied and situated effects of the event. When Badiou mentions the 'encounter' there is an implication that we are not just talking about the active agency of the subject, but there is much more of an appreciation of what *happens-to* the subject. The encounter is contrasted to 'communication', which is defined as the circulation of 'opinions' and "opinions are representations without truth" (Badiou, 2001: 50). They sustain sociality but are confined to the quotidian multiplicity of the situation. "What arises from a truth process" instead "cannot be communicated" because it is a supplement to the situation wrought by the rupture of the event (Badiou, 2001: 51-52). In connecting the fidelity of the subject to an event we must have an encounter that instantiates the truth-as-real:

“The immortal that I am capable of being cannot be spurred in me by the effect of communicative sociality, it must be directly seized by fidelity... to enter into the composition of a subject of truth can only be something that happens to you” (Badiou, 2001: 51).

We could read this as implying that fidelity to the event solely involves a personal, individual experience, but that would be at odds with the manner in which Badiou has defined the subject across his books since the 1980s. The subject has rarely been conflated with the individual, especially so in the domain of politics. In his essay ‘Politics as Truth Procedure’ (Badiou, 2004b), originally first published in French in 1998, Badiou makes the case that politics is of a different order to truth procedures in art, love, mathematics and science. The latter are ‘aristocratic’ in that their re-presentation does not require a genuinely collective endeavour. They involve the universalisation of their own truth-as-real (“they universalize their own singularity”), but political thought differs in that it is necessarily “the thought of all”. This brings a novel approach to the situation though in that every emancipatory politics that emerges rejects finitude/enclosure, summoning infinity within the situation as “subjective universality”. What this means in practice is that a situation is never ‘closed’, as politics is essentially a means of problematising the practice and deliberation of ‘the possible’ (Badiou, 2004b: 154).

In terms of the state of the situation, politics summons the institutional state because of its collective nature, and the desire to universalise its regulatory truth. Events are important in so much as they reveal the state of the situation – its excess of power, metastructure, repression. If the excess of state power is made visible and measurable then resistance is possible. The multiplicity within the state of the situation becomes freed from the state.

This creates a subjective awareness of distance from the state, allowing thought outside of it (Badiou, 2004b: 155-156).

In thinking about the emergence of resistance and political novelty there is therefore a dialectical movement between repression and political imaginaries within the framework of the institutional state. The contradictions and excesses that result provide the (evental) site for a new politics against the state (of the situation). In theorising both the emergence of resistant truth-procedures and the renewal of state power we can therefore seek to fix the appearance of new forms against the state, making contradiction – and the encounter with it – the central loci of political change as opposed to an act of naming. It is a way of thinking about the event that is much in keeping with the manner in which Badiou has theorised the political subject in *Theory of the Subject*, and has understood the role of bodies in *Logics of Worlds*, moving us away from the brute ‘decisionism’ (Wright, 2013: 33) that is threatened at times in his work. It is also a way of thinking about the event that means we can account for how the event functions in history, as well as how its truth is represented to us outside of a hegemonic logic of communication, for a truth can be understood to be carried by a dialectical process of conflict and the ongoing encounter it brings, as opposed to a more crudely defined focus on the proactive agency of the subject. We can chart the key moments in this process of struggle and the contradictions that it entails in a narrative form of investigation.

There are two elements in this process that are particularly important: firstly, describing the state of the situation and hegemonic forms of communication (Maoist discourse in Chapter Three; postmodern protest in Chapter Four); secondly, thinking about sequencing and periodisation – how have moments of struggle, change, contradiction and uncertainty

given new life to a struggle both in terms of how a particular group takes meaning from them and in terms of the horizons of political possibilities that they open-up?

### 3. The Spectre of Mao: Politics as the Art of the Possible

#### 3.1. Introduction

It has become common in readings of Badiou's work to emphasise the importance of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Maoism more broadly. This is not unwarranted, for Badiou has spoken at length of his own intellectual debts to both. They have had a recurring function in many of his texts, providing the framework around which political and philosophical concepts have been introduced.

As I showed in the previous chapter, in *The Rational Kernel* Maoism provides Badiou with a means of critiquing and reinterpreting the intellectual heritage of left wing politics in France. In *Theory of the Subject* Maoism is used to help reinterpret the sequencing of a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist revolutionary lineage and historical periodisation more broadly. In *Being and Event*, it is the Cultural Revolution that has signalled a new kind of political militancy, anti-state and upheld by a 'tenacious fidelity' to the name of the event (Badiou, 2007a: 358). In *Logics of Worlds* the Cultural Revolution affirms the truth of a common "matrix of state politics", from 81BC China to the Cultural Revolution, with struggles between Legalists and Confucians equated with those between Stalinists and Maoists (Badiou, 2009a: 20-21).

In this chapter, through a discussion of how Maoism and the Cultural Revolution connect to the 1989 Tiananmen protests I address problems relating to periodisation and nomination in Badiou's understanding of fidelity. Doing so brings attention to tensions between immanence and rupture within his understanding of historical change. My argument in the text below favours an increased emphasis on immanence in relating

Badiou's understanding of fidelity and change to sequences of political conflict and revolution. This is not though to suggest that the important function of rupture should be diminished, but rather that it should be reinterpreted in the light of immanent struggles within the state and competing political imaginaries.

Doing so does however involve challenging Badiou's reading of the Cultural Revolution. I therefore argue in this chapter that Badiou's failure to sufficiently engage with the intimate relationship between Maoist dialectics and the perennial rebirth of the party-state connects to his attempt to resurrect revolutionary politics in the memory of the Red Guard activism of the early Cultural Revolution years. Doing so blinds him to the complicity of revolutionary politics in the reactionary settlement of the Cultural Revolution.

In Chapter One I noted my own uneasiness with a tendency to overemphasise a rhetorical form of nomination. I argue in this chapter that Badiou's reading of the Cultural Revolution highlights just how problematic it can be to conflate fidelity with a 'tenacious' kind of rhetoric. A dismissal of detailed historical analyses of the real struggles at the heart of the Cultural Revolution and the important contradictions that they bring to attention is not helpful in thinking the emergence of genuine novelty *within* a situation or world. It is the ability of the political subject to recognise the emergence of such change and reorganise its political being in relation to it, which sustains the possibility of a radical politics and not fidelity to particular subjective forms from afar through which the 'revolutionary' is treated as a type of persistent sociological category.

This chapter is split into three main sections. In the first I detail Badiou's account of the Cultural Revolution and the importance that event held for French Maoists in the late-

1960s and 1970s. I then assess the sequence of struggle in communist China that culminates in the Cultural Revolution, drawing on the immense weight of historical scholarship on the subject – much of which Badiou has been dismissive of – in order to highlight the discrepancies with Badiou’s narrative and important lessons that emerge. In the third section I investigate how nominations of the Cultural Revolution have functioned in relation to the Tiananmen protests. Doing so brings attention to conflict between students and intellectuals and the CCP elite and demonstrates the enduring importance of struggles within the state over the ownership and direction of state policy. It also demonstrates the tendency for such struggles to channel resistance in a manner that does not threaten the fundamentals of power in society. I discuss this problem of the fraught relationship between immanence, rupture and conflict in further depth in the subsequent chapters.

### **3.2. Badiou’s Maoism**

“...universality, which is the real attribute of any corpus of truths, will have nothing to do with predicates. A real politics knows nothing of identities, even the identity – so tenuous, so variable – of ‘communists’. It knows only fragments of the real, and an idea of the real is testimony to the fact that the work of its truth is ongoing” (Badiou, 2010: 8).

Badiou argues in *The Rational Kernel* and *Theory of the Subject* that Maoism allows us to rediscover the dialectical interconnection of idealism and materialism, that as opposed to being opposed starkly against one-another, as Engels does (see Chapter Two), they should instead be productively opposed as a logic of historical scission, one that affords a central place for the activist. As such, staid knowledge and radical truth can be dialectically opposed to one-another through what Bosteels describes as ‘investigation’ inspired by



Mao's famous Hunan Report (Bosteels, 2005).

In *Being and Event*, as such, Badiou argues that such a mode of investigation is linked to fidelity as “the procedure of fidelity traverses existing knowledge” (Badiou, 2007a: 327). This raises an important question: are we talking about a process of fidelity that seizes upon a contradiction within the situation – that which evades the ordering count and in such a manner, dialectally ‘traverses existing knowledge’; or, does fidelity involve holding onto a kind of meta-truth that is abstracted from the situation, and in that sense ‘traverses’ the situation without moving within it?

Badiou's description of the Cultural Revolution in *Logics of Worlds* would certainly imply the latter (Badiou, 2009a: 20-21) – that the ‘periodizing function’ (Badiou, 2009b: 47) of the event is being related back to overarching referents as opposed to being subtracted from the situation. In this sense, investigation would have a decidedly ahistorical function – one that privileges idealism above materialism, and is not in keeping with Badiou's arguments in *The Rational Kernel* and *Theory of the Subject* about the relationship between materialism and idealism. Whilst there is much in *Being and Event* that lends itself towards a privileging of the function of overarching meta-truth through the linking of generic truth and nomination, Badiou links investigation to “the study of local or finite forms of a procedure of fidelity (enquiries)” within that text (Badiou, 2007a: 327). Badiou's framing of politics in Maoist China does however lend itself towards universal referents above local investigations, and as a result we can see a tension emerge between novelty that is immanent to the situation and generic truth that in a sense effectuates a rupture through a kind of rhetorical ‘forcing’ (Bosteels, 2011: 34).

In the *Communist Hypothesis* – which contains reflections on the Paris Commune, May ’68 and the Cultural Revolution – Badiou is typically unrepentant on the stances he has taken over the years. A failure is a stage, and whilst it is a bitter pill to swallow initially, it has a redemptive quality over time as it makes possible something new, a “higher mode of thought” (2010: 9 & 11). For Badiou, failure to prove a hypothesis does not ultimately disprove the value of both the hypothesis and the process itself (2010: 6-7). The Communist Hypothesis has not been disproved, but rather its vitality has remained because it gives a consistency to history (“international and supra-temporal”), which can redeem any apparent failure in the service of a greater Idea (2010: 16). The Communist Hypothesis is true so long as it is universally true. The regional variants of communism in the Twentieth Century are redeemed as “fragments of the real”, in that they contribute lessons and serve as standard bearers for the idea of communism (2010: 8).

In *The Century* this argument assumes a more structuralist form as the zeitgeist of the Twentieth Century is said to be a “passion for the real”, binary in its depiction of the stakes of politics and violent in its outcome. Badiou refuses to take a negative ethical stance towards this violence, arguing (via Nietzsche) that it is “beyond good and evil”: “The passion for the real is devoid of morality... morality is a residue of the old world” (2008a: 63). The object of the passion for the real was the restoration or production of a New Man. Restoration in the fascist, conservative sense – linked to blood and soil. Production in the communist, progressive sense – not predicated on the possession of property, or the nation-state (2008a-66).

Badiou acknowledges that this violent subtractive political ontology is liable to tear itself apart: “It seems that the ultimately solemn conviction that one is in the process of touching

on the real leads to a process of extreme subjective feverishness, one of whose manifestations is the incessant designation of heretics and suspects” (Badiou, 2008a: 65 & 149). It is little wonder then that following Solzhenitsyn and awareness of the gulag, alongside the other genocidal horrors of the Twentieth Century that many would fixate on terror, and turn towards the language of human rights and relativistic concern for the other – which Badiou lambasts in his *Ethics* (2001) – and the obvious corollary of which is a parliamentary state that can guarantee the protection of citizen’s rights – a fact which Badiou again laments in *The Century* (2008a: 66).

If not a parliamentary state, as in China, then at least there is a strong state under Deng that can manage the economy (Badiou, 2008a: 61). This, for Badiou, is the fulfilment of the “slow” march of the right:

“...the inglorious failure of reconstructions and repetitions. The moment when we revert from revolution to state” (Badiou, 2010: 23)

It legitimises the struggle against the ‘capitalist roaders’ and Deng’s China makes real the Red Guards’ slogans:

“Now who today can dispute that Deng Xiaoping – portrayed by the activists of the Cultural Revolution as the number-two capitalist roader in the party’ – did in fact endorse a programme of development and social construction diametrically opposed to Mao’s innovative, collectivist project? (Badiou, 2008a: 62)”

In the next section of this chapter I will let the history ‘do the talking’ for me, as the wider

academic literature on Maoism and the Cultural Revolution displays the contrast with Badiou's framing, but firstly here it is helpful to introduce what I see as being the key features that define Badiou's reading of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution and the context that they emerge in. In Chapter One I introduced Maoist 'investigation', and in Chapter Two I showed the philosophical underpinnings of that activist orientation towards thinking about fidelity and change. Those ideas see their practical application in Badiou's depiction of Mao and the Cultural Revolution, at the heart of which are: an emphasis on a rhetorical form of nomination – what Russo has termed as 'the declaratory essence of politics' (Russo, 2006: 677) – which is seen in the figure of the 'Master' (Mao), and the rhetoric of the Red Guards, as well as in the relationship between the two; also, the idea of the 'purification' of politics and militancy, alongside that of 'betrayal', both of which have a messianic and millenarian tone.

Despite the Cultural Revolution having been proclaimed by Badiou to have been such an important event for his own work, it is perhaps surprising that he has not devoted a full length study to it. Instead, what we are left with is a series of fragmentary comments, in interviews and across his many books over the years. His most serious engagements with the subject is the article 'The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?' (2005), which featured in a special issue of the journal *Positions* on 'Alain Badiou and the Cultural Revolution' and is reproduced in a slightly modified form as a chapter in *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010).

Badiou's accomplice in recent years has been Alessandro Russo, who has supported the former's reading of the Cultural Revolution with some more in-depth studies. In 2006 the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* published a letter that had been circulated three years

earlier by Badiou and Russo proposing an ‘International Center for the Study of the Cultural Revolution’. In many ways it is their ‘call to arms’, attacking the “extreme weakness and confusion of scholarly research on the Cultural Revolution” (Badiou and Russo, 2006: 701), and demanding a renewed historical study of the Cultural Revolution based upon their (Badiou’s) reading of it. Badiou and Russo argue that:

“The historically unprecedented face-to-face that occurred during the Cultural Revolution between the active convictions of millions of people and the great questions of politics and the State is today almost banned from thought; it is bathed in an aura of phantasmagoric horror and ultimately in an atmosphere of ignorance and superstition” (Badiou and Russo, 2006: 701).

This notion of ‘terror’ has been at the heart of Badiou’s arguments about the Cultural Revolution over the years, through which he argues that historians, in discussing the violence and political machinations of that era have overlooked the ‘truth’ contained within that event, which was a proliferation of grass-roots Red Guard activism outside the framework of the state (Badiou, 2005: 483-484, Pluth, 2010: 6). The notion that this was a spontaneous movement from below is central to Badiou’s argument – he notes that one of the principle questions in the Cultural Revolution is “what gives unity to a politics, if it is not directly guaranteed by the formal unity of the state?” (Badiou, 2005: 484). As I will discuss in the next section though, Badiou’s position on Red Guard activism has not though been supported by historical studies of the Cultural Revolution and hence they are the object of Badiou’s – and now Russo’s – ire.

Badiou's argument has also depended on a counter-chronology of the Cultural Revolution, arguing that what matters in the Cultural Revolution – its properly revolutionary element – took place between May 1966 and September 1967, as opposed to the commonly accepted chronology of 1966-1976 (Badiou, 2005: 486, Badiou, 2010)<sup>8</sup>. For Badiou, what we see in 1966 and 1967 represents the possibility of a new kind of mass politics, in which 'bureaucratic formalism' is attacked, and a proliferation of grass-roots organisational forms take place (Badiou, 2010: 107).

This is also at the heart of Badiou and Russo's argument and they note that historians have failed to engage with the available documentary evidence that supports their claims. As such, Russo has excellently documented the extent of this grass-roots mobilisation in relation to the immense cultural output of the various Red Guard factions through newspapers and other publications (Russo, 2006). Other academics have in fact extensively discussed the place of 'big character' propaganda posters – 'dazibao' – which have long been a feature of Chinese politics and were used by the various actors to put their messages across, a point that Badiou and Russo appear to overlook (Andreas, 2002, Andreas, 2007, Croizier et al., 2010, Cushing and Tompkins, 2007, Sheng, 1990).

Whilst there might be evidence of substantial grass-roots mobilisation – a fact that has never been denied in the academic literature on the subject, despite the claims to the contrary by Badiou and Russo – the next question, which neither Badiou or Russo sufficiently address relates to motivations and beliefs: to what ends was this activism directed? It is an important point for us to stress at the outset, for as will become clearer in

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Century* this becomes 1965-1968. Cf. BADIOU, A. 2008a. *The Century*, Cambridge, Polity. Pg. 62.

the remainder of the chapter, the mobilisation of the ‘mass-line’ was an important feature of Maoist rule. We cannot therefore easily make the assumption that grass-roots activism was free of political manipulation and direction from above. Political campaigns involving *dazibao* and mass-mobilisation were a common feature of Chinese politics prior to the Cultural Revolution: the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), the Hundred Flowers Movement (1956), the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-1959) (Sheng, 1990). We have to ask then whether what Badiou and Russo say was novel and revolutionary in the early years of the Cultural Revolution was really novel in Chinese politics? The weight of evidence that I will discuss in the next section refutes the claims made by Badiou and Russo.

The next issue relates though to what, as I noted above, Badiou terms as the ‘periodizing function’ of the Cultural Revolution (Badiou, 2009b: 47). Badiou argues that the Cultural Revolution is “the first communist revolution in history” (Badiou, 2009b: 185). He acknowledges that it takes place in the context of different struggles internal to Chinese communism when he notes that it is “internal to the party-state... and fails as such” (Badiou, 2010: 103-104). Where Badiou’s account is especially problematic however is in its un-critical adoption of Maoist rhetoric from that struggle. Badiou follows Mao’s lead in attacking the ‘bureaucratic state bourgeoisie’ as the enemy that had entrenched a Stalinist state socialism (socialism “with a moustache”) and was the rightful target of mass-mobilisation from below on cultural issues (Badiou, 2009b: 20 & 79). As I will show later in this chapter however, Mao’s pronouncements on just who or what constituted the enemy were deeply implicated in the maintenance of his own personal power. They did not represent the kind of “purification... of the antagonistic force” that Badiou praises in the Cultural Revolution (Badiou, 2009b: 43). Furthermore, as I will also show below in

relation to the Peng Dehuai/Hai Jui affair, the place of Mao's personal rivalries and struggles meant that the kind of cultural politics from below that Badiou praises is indeed difficult to perceive as much more than a romanticised reading.

In defending Mao against charges surrounding his role in the disasters of the Great Leap Badiou makes a claim that I think is instructive of his wider position on Maoism and the Cultural Revolution, that it was a matter of 'political' failure and not an ideological problem (Badiou, 2005: 485). This is an important point to stress, for it ultimately blinds Badiou to an appreciation of the ideological contradictions of Maoism, as he adopts the 'party-line'. It is vital to note that when Badiou discusses the 'failure' of the Cultural Revolution, and the notion that it was "the first communist revolution in history" (Badiou, 2009b: 185) that designation of failure has to be qualified in the light of Badiou's own political commitments and it is only so within the parameters that Badiou sets for communism to be communism.

In *Theory of the Subject* Mao is praised by Badiou for "endorsing...the riots of the youth" (Badiou, 2009b: 82-83). Mao is ultimately criticised by Badiou though in later texts for his role in the Cultural Revolution, whilst the innocence of the Red Guard is preserved in his analysis (Badiou, 2005, Badiou, 2007a, Badiou, 2010), but as I intend to show below, the complicity in violence, terror and the reassertion of state power goes both ways. The relationship between the Master instigator and the faithful activist seems to be a contradiction that sits at the heart of Badiou's account of the Cultural Revolution and is never satisfactorily resolved (cf. Badiou, 2005: 506).



Notions of a purification of politics often imply an overarching standard or set of referents. A purification might conversely relate to the tactical imperatives of a struggle, and the localised requirements for success. If the latter is the case though, it seems problematic to transpose the context-specific requirements or standards from one situation to another, and it also becomes difficult to provide any kind of judgement. One of the problems during the Cultural Revolution was precisely this desire to demonstrate purity and fealty to Mao and the Party from different Red Guard factions, escalating their violence in a competition of sorts (Russo, 2005). In that sense they became lost to the day-to-day struggles of the Revolution, its bizarre logics and rivalries, whilst the rhetoric of Mao and idealised/utopian notions of revolution hung above (I discuss this further below in relation to the Paris Commune).

It is this relationship between abstract idealised notions of a rarefied politics and that of a purity of revolutionary fervour from below, which ultimately allows Badiou to claim that the central question of the Cultural Revolution is ‘the subjective question’: “how did the Cultural Revolution, mass uprising against the new bureaucratic state bourgeoisie, run into the problem of the reshaping of the party? (Badiou, 2009b: 47)” If the principle issue at the heart of the Cultural Revolution is framed in purely subjective terms as a kind of millenarian struggle then it must remain open. This is though a question that we can answer by distancing ourselves from struggles in Maoist China and not allowing choosing a side to blind us to the complexities and contradictions of the struggle – hence why it is important to discuss nominations of the Cultural Revolution in relation to Tiananmen.

The French Maoists ultimately did pick a side, but it is also wrong to reduce Badiou’s framing of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution to the context of political struggles in

France in the 1960s and 1970s, for his work speaks to a global resistance more than it does to a French parochialism. This is why Badiou and Russo call for the study of ‘political singularities’, it is only through such referents they argue that the specificities of the struggles in the ‘age of revolutions’ can be given meaning (Badiou and Russo, 2006: 702). This sentiment is reflected well in comments from a fellow ‘soixante-huitard’, Emmanuel Terray, quoted by Ross:

“I was like many others a fervent partisan – from France – of the Cultural Revolution. But I don’t consider this to be a regrettable youthful error about which it would be better to be silent today, or, on the other hand, to make an ostentatious confession. I know today, of course, that the Cultural Revolution we dreamt about and that inspired part of our political practice didn’t have much in common with the Cultural Revolution as it was lived out in China. And yet I am not ready to put my former admiration into the category of a mental aberration. In fact, the symbolic power of Maoist China operated in Europe at the end of the sixties independently of Chinese reality as such. “Our” Cultural Revolution was very far from that, but it had the weight and the consistency of those collective representations that sociology and anthropology have studied for so long...” (Ross, 2002: 96)

It is my contention in this chapter though that “the Cultural Revolution as it was lived out in China” can actually tell us a lot about how Badiou’s philosophy can be related to real-world struggles. Rather than retreating into a rarefied political, actually-existing Maoism should be the test of Maoism with its characters, conflicts and contradictions.

### 3.3. Actually-Existing Maoism

As we have seen then, it is important to draw a distinction between French Maoism and Chinese Maoism. The latter is marked by what Kraus terms as a decidedly Leninist “concern for the state as the central institution by which coercion is organized in society, and in which are embedded many of the mysteries of class conflict” (Kraus, 1981: 9). The former sees in Maoism a utopian end to the party-state – the final stage of communism.

Kraus’ observation is extensively supported by the writings of the most significant Chinese Marxist philosophers, as Nick Knight (2005) has shown in great detail. From its earliest days Chinese communism was inspired by an activist outlook, but the state retained a central hold on the Chinese communist political imaginary. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s (CPSU) party-state-centric ‘New Philosophy’ was accepted verbatim by the Chinese communists in the 1930s, and formed the basis of the latter’s own orthodoxy – ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ (Knight, 2005: 7). The New Philosophy referred to the ideas promulgated by the Institute of Red Professors, and most notably Mark Mitin in the 1930s. It was notable in that it cemented the position of the CPSU as the ultimate arbiter of philosophical debates. Countervailing opinion would no longer be tolerated if it challenged official party doctrine in any way. The triumph of the New Philosophy was made possible by Deborin’s earlier success in promoting ‘dialectical materialism’ above ‘mechanical materialism’, and the ascent of leaders favourable towards Deborin’s position. By 1931 however, the Red Professors had turned on Deborin and his supporters were unceremoniously attacked (Knight, 2005: 73-74). It was though, despite its apparent dogmatism, a fit for both the requirements of strengthening the Chinese Communist Party during a period of civil conflict and foreign invasion, and then the demands of rebuilding a society devastated by years of warfare (Karl, 2010, Knight, 2005, Selden, 1995).

The influence of the New Philosophy is an important point to stress in the history of Chinese communism, one which is often overlooked in asserting a struggle between apparently state-centric Stalinist and anti-state Maoist currents of thought. This is not to say that such tensions did not exist, but more so that such a straight dichotomy overlooks the crucial lesson, which is that the Chinese communist concern for the state introduces a productive dialectical split at the heart of the Chinese communist movement, in its ideology, the implementation of policy and in the institutions of state (cf. Andreas, 2009, Bachman, 2006, Karl, 2010, Kraus, 1981).

There is also a case to be made that the Stalinist and Maoist division owed much more to divisions over economic planning than they did to the fundamentals of the party-state. After the emergence of the New Philosophy and the ascent of Stalin in the Soviet Union, economic development there came to be centred upon mass-production in the factories, administered by a bureaucratic class, not dissimilar to Fordist modes of capitalist production (Skocpol, 1976b: 73-74). There had though been earlier advocates of alternative models that privileged peasant organisation up until the 1920s (Skocpol, 1976b: 288). Further, it was not so much the fact that the New Philosophy was opposed to those particular models, but more that the demands of adherence to an ideological orthodoxy that it imposed upon the party mandated unity of purpose (Hammond, 1978, Knight, 2005).

In the Chinese case there was a struggle over the direction of economic policy in the 1950s and 1960s, between Maoist advocates of rural development programmes, centred upon peasant mobilisation, and supporters of Soviet-style heavy industry, administered by a powerful bureaucracy. This antagonism unfolded through the Hundred Flowers and Anti-Rightist Campaigns, effecting the Great Leap Forward, before culminating in the Cultural

Revolution (Bachman, 2006, Whyte, 1973). There is though evidence to suggest that this struggle was both an ideological necessity, sanctioned by Mao, and inseparable from the institutional structure of the communist party-state. The struggle also had historical roots, going back to the wartime years of the Chinese communist party, with splits between a rural peasant faction led by Mao, and a Soviet-backed party leadership in the cities.

Both China and the Soviet Union had been predominantly agrarian societies prior to the advent of a communist revolutionary movement, but it was more pronounced in the Chinese case. China also lacked an urban industrial base prior to the victory of the Communists in the Chinese Civil War (1949) (Karl, 2010, Riskin, 1971, Skocpol, 1976a, Skocpol, 1976b). During the early years of the Chinese Communist Party however, the Chinese being the junior partner looked to Soviet guidance from Comintern agents (Karl, 2010: 24, Li, 2008: 10). The Soviets insisted first upon an alliance with the Nationalists (backed by urban industrialists and rural landowners). When that was broken in the White Terror with the massacre of communists, they continued to demand that the Chinese communists focus on gaining power in the major coastal cities (Karl, 2010: 24 & 33-34).

Mao was the strongest critic of that strategy, arguing instead that the real base of power for the communists was in the countryside amongst the peasants, from where the nationalists could be outmanoeuvred and the cities isolated. Mao's reasoning was a result of his 1927 Hunan Report, following a period of working alongside peasants, whom Mao argued had already initiated from below many of the kinds of programmes that the communists wished to implement (Karl, 2010: 31-32, Knight, 2007: 77-78).<sup>9</sup> He therefore saw in peasant

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<sup>9</sup> Knight does add a qualification here though, arguing that other texts from Mao around the same time had actually been scathing of the peasants, namely, their 'passivity',

activism a means of bypassing the lack of an industrial proletariat. At the time left-leaning nationalists were more supportive of his position than the communist leadership (Karl, 2010: 30). Mao ultimately won-out however following the Long March in which he led the communists away from a position of near disaster through a series of strategic retreats and guerrilla actions in rural China (Chaliand, 1982, Scobell, 2003).

Upon victory in the Civil War a Communist Party comprised predominantly of peasant guerrilla fighters with little formal education needed to administer a planned economy. Lacking technical expertise, the urban bourgeoisie were enlisted by the communists to manage State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). A curious situation therefore ensued in which peasant communist leaders maintained political control, whilst a managerial class below them administered the economy (Andreas, 2009: 18-19, Li, 2008: 27). In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, for the majority of the 1950s, urban industrial development was prioritised, capitalising on industrial infrastructure left over from the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, and rebuilding the industrial capacity of the major coastal cities (Skocpol, 1976b: 307).

It was then in the mid-late 1950s that tensions began to come to the fore between the Maoists and bureaucrats. Administrators and planners who favoured a Soviet-style emphasis on heavy industry capitalised on the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956) in which advocates of a more pragmatic programme of economic development, including

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‘immaturity’ and lack of leadership and organisation. Knight notes that the Hunan Report was different in that it talked-up the potential of the Hunanese peasants to the party leadership. For Knight it is therefore much more of a speculative document, one that is intended to help make the case for a greater focus on the countryside. Cf. KNIGHT, N. 2007. *Rethinking Mao: Explorations in Mao Zedong's Thought*, Lanham, Lexington Books. PP. 77-78.

market mechanisms and a balance between urban and rural regions, had been purged. The party leadership, lacking technical expertise, deferred to the arguments of the industrialist faction, which were influential in the advent of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961). The failures of the Great Leap only encouraged ill feeling between the Maoists and bureaucrats in the subsequent years (Bachman, 2006). These divisions have been explained in terms of political economy, communist ideology, and the nature of communist rule within the literature and all three are important.

### **3.3.1. Political Economy**

It is important to outline the very real stakes that underpinned struggles over Chinese development policy in the 1950s and 1960s. As Ens Manning and Wemheuer have detailed, famine devastated China repeatedly prior to the advent of communist rule: half a million deaths in the 1920-1921 drought, 10 million deaths in the North China Drought (1928-1930), between 2 and 3 million deaths in Henan Province during the Sino-Japanese War (1942-43). If we go back to the Nineteenth Century, the death toll climbs even higher. The communists inherited a country decimated by years of warfare, and on the brink of starvation (Ens Manning and Wemheuer, 2011: 3).

Despite this context however, China did possess some historical advantages in agriculture. The various forms of farming in China were closely integrated with one-another in networks of small-holdings, villages, and market towns. Peasants were used to operating as part of a broader, integrated, structure of production, compared to pre-communist Russia, for example, in which landlords strictly demarcated agriculture and trade. Chinese agriculture was therefore amenable to large-scale programmes of collectivisation and mass peasant organisation (Skocpol, 1976b: 290-291 & 308).

This potential was misused during the Great Leap, firstly through a mass drive towards rural industrialisation, and then through the creation of the disastrous People's Communes – 50,000 strong integrated habitation and production units, which tore apart the traditional organisation of rural life. The communes controlled the supply and distribution of food, as well as all social activities (Ens Manning and Wemheuer, 2011: 5-6 & 7). The precise number of deaths from the resulting famines is contested in contemporary literature, but most authors concur on a figure in the tens of millions. Whilst Joseph Ball has brought attention to problems surrounding dramatic accounts of the Great Leap that have often relied on questionable statistics (Ball, 2006), Frank Dikötter has been able to draw on much more reliable recently available access to Chinese archives and maintains a figure in the tens of millions, arguing that a minimum figure of 42 million deaths should be used (Dikötter, 2011), corresponding more closely to older academic accounts from the likes of Ashton et al. and Banister who both settle on a figure of 30 million (Ashton et al., 1984, Banister, 1987).

The Great Leap resulted in a power struggle within the party. Defence Minister Peng Dehuai criticised the policy of industrialisation, and in particular, continued high steel production targets, whilst millions were starving. As a result, Mao branded Peng's criticisms as 'right-wing opportunism' and he was purged from power (Ens Manning and Wemheuer, 2011: 8). It was indicative of Mao's position during communist rule, in which he sought to position himself 'above the fray', capitalising personally from the political fall-out between rival factions, often disappointing those who would self-describe as 'Maoists', but were bowed by the Chairman's charismatic authority (Andreas, 2007, Meisner, 1978).



In terms of the ‘Maoist’ alternative to Stalinist models of industrialisation and organisation, there was a countervailing movement during the 1950s and 1960s that emphasised ‘small industry’ – small-scale, labour intensive production processes, under regional control and reliant upon primitive technologies. The devolution of control over this process posed a challenge to the accumulation of central bureaucratic power (Riskin, 1971: 245-246 & 272-273). However, there is a strong possibility that this process, despite providing much needed materials for agriculture, may also have contributed towards removing labour from the fields (Ali, 2010: 149, Riskin, 1971: 247).

### **3.3.2. Communist Ideology**

What then are the ideological roots of the contradictions and conflicts in Chinese economic development discussed above?

Chinese Marxist philosophers of the 1920s and 1930s had reflected at length on the problem of determinism in Marx’s writings (Knight, 2005). They sought to reconcile the apparently deterministic features of a scientific Marxism with the requirements to engage in the world as activists and contribute towards change. Marx wrote of changes in the material ‘base’ producing changes in the more ideational ‘superstructure’ of society. However, he also discussed at length the fact that the two existed in an interrelated whole. Superstructural elements were embedded in material relations of production and vice versa. His understanding of the relationship between the two was rooted in dialectics. Historical progression followed a necessary interaction between the two (Kraus, 1981, Ollman, 1996, Walder, 1977).

The problem of ‘determinism’ or ‘voluntarism’ arises however from the attempt – owing

much to Engels – to ground the dialectic in a rational scientific theory of materialism, and then the institutionalisation of those ideas within the framework of the communist party-state (Wright, 2013: 34). Questions have persisted ever since over the extent to which precise material conditions must be met, or the extent to which the revolutionary can give history a ‘push.’ In the famous Brenner-Wallerstein debate, for example, Robert Brenner made the case that capitalist development had to follow specific conditions that mirrored the European experience, in order to be labelled as such. ‘Dependency’ theories, which emphasised the effects of imperialism and world-systemic market formation preceding the advent of contemporary capitalism, he argued, represented a heretical ‘neo-Smithian’ deviation from Marxist orthodoxy (Brenner, 1977).

Voluntarism, alternatively, is the notion that one can through a kind of revolutionary ‘will’ transcend one’s social class of origin, and produce change in the material relations of production. The emphasis on the ‘will’ can be overstated however, as we are not speaking of an act of pure volition. Instead, elements within the superstructural sphere such as ideological education, culture, political directives from the centre, and one’s participation in political structures and institutions play a proactive role in guiding the process. The underlying reasoning for voluntarism is that it then makes possible rapid changes in the economic base of society that might have otherwise have been decades or even centuries in the making, thus taking the Leninist maxim of giving history a ‘push’ to its fullest realisation (Hallward, 2009, Karl, 2010: 58-59, Kraus, 1981: 7-8 & 9).

Chinese communist, or more specifically Maoist, ‘voluntarism’ has been discussed at length. Claiming that Chinese communism is wholly voluntarist is problematic however. The Maoist notion of the ‘mass-line’ in which mass-action by peasant and proletarian

revolutionaries was always privileged appears to indicate voluntarist leanings, as does Mao's Hunan Report-inspired focus on the peasantry, which provided a means of overcoming the absence of a significant industrial proletariat, as discussed above.<sup>10</sup> However, Mao's writings speak to an understanding of the relationship between base and superstructure which is much more dialectical in nature, as opposed to a simple binary between 'determinism' and 'voluntarism' through which base and superstructure are opposed.

Knight has aptly described the importance of Mao's 'practice-based' or 'activist' epistemology in this regard. For Mao, distinctions between the material and the ideational were irrelevant, as thought itself was embedded in a material real, with material effects. Cognition and perception were firmly material processes. It was through the engagement with this material real that truth could be determined (Knight, 2005: 176-177). Revolutionary activity, going back to the Hunan Report, was always then to be based upon 'real world' practice in which theory did not exist abstractly, but was refined through the encounter with material conditions (Bosteels, 2005, Karl, 2010: 58-59).

The true significance of this understanding was that policy was not to be dictated by Marxist philosophers, an established orthodoxy, or the party leadership, but instead, it had to be arrived at through a process of mass action. As a result ideological contradictions would be resolved, 'reactionaries' would be exposed, and processes refined. It presents a

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<sup>10</sup> For Whyte the mass-line involved a Maoist attempt to place the attainment of political purity above technical competence in the economic affairs of the state, whilst for Meisner the mass-line likewise involved the economic life of the state increasingly being understood by the masses "in a political form". Cf. MEISNER, M. 1978. Dazhai: the Mass Line in Practice. *Modern China*, 4, 27-62. Pg. 28, WHYTE, M. K. 1973. Bureaucracy and Modernization in China: The Maoist Critique. *American Sociological Review*. 38, 2. Pg. 150.

contrast to the bureaucratic formalism of Stalinist Russia, in which decision-making followed a more ‘top-down’ process of rigid social and economic engineering (Knight, 2005, Knight, 2007, Kraus, 1981, Hammond, 1978, Meisner, 1978, Whyte, 1973).

The most serious and sustained Soviet criticism of the Maoist model however focused on what was seen as a distortion of Marxist class categories through the emphasis on the peasantry. One notable Soviet commentary, for example, by Gudoshnikov & Topornin (quoted in Bedeski), accused the CCP of “dissolving the proletariat” by equating “the working class with other classes, social strata and groups” (Bedeski, 1977: 338). As Kraus rightly notes however, for the Chinese, “to insist upon firm working-class credentials in a peasant society would have been to deny the possibility of a mass revolutionary party” (Kraus, 1981: 9).

### **3.3.3. The Nature of Communist Rule**

Despite the Maoist emphasis on the mass line, the party-state remained central to communist rule in China. The precise function of the party-state was as an arena in which a dialectical process of resolving tensions and contradictions could unfold. For Wang Hui, this was a largely positive process that demonstrated the strength of the party as a mechanism of progressive political change (Wang, 2006). The principle impediments to the success of this process however were: Mao’s personal role, the manner in which factional struggle could distort communist ideology, ultimately leading to a kind of Thermidorian backlash, and the structural dynamics of the party-state, which reproduced social stratification in a supposedly classless society (cf. Andreas, 2002, Andreas, 2007, Andreas, 2009, Bachman, 2006, Knight, 2007, Riskin, 1971, Whyte, 1973). The latter has been used as a justification for Maoist political campaigns, i.e. that the Maoists were well

aware of the tendency within other communist societies for the creation of bureaucratic elites and top-down models of rule (cf. Ali, 2010, Badiou, 2005, Ball, 2006, Cavendish and Gray, 1968). However, as I will argue below with regards the Cultural Revolution, Maoist politics was not immune from these problems, and often re-imposed new hierarchies when it was claimed that others had been successfully dismantled.

As discussed above, because of the demands of administering a planned economy and the requirements for technical expertise, access to cultural and intellectual resources came to facilitate a new career path within the party post-1949. Patronage was also integral to maintaining the membership loyalty required for rule in a party-state. There were therefore opportunities that opened-up for a managerial class within the party, who could maintain their position through the importance of their technical expertise, and in-turn reward one-another through mutually supportive patronage networks – ‘jobs for the boys’ to use a colloquialism (Andreas, 2009, Bian et al., 2001, Meisner, 1978).

There were limits to this process however. The nature of Maoist rule meant that seismic shifts in macro-economic policy frequently took place. A particular government department might be feted with prestige and resources for a number of months before being dramatically pushed to the margins. The key Maoist political campaigns: the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956), the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-1959), and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), led to further instability as individuals were purged from their positions, imprisoned and demoted. It was therefore incredibly difficult to accumulate a fixed base of political power in Maoist era China (Andreas, 2009, Bachman, 2006, Bramall, 2006, Wang, 2006).

Political instability meant that there was not a fixed political, ethical, or legal standard against which behaviour might be judged. If a veteran party loyalist and patriot such as Peng Dehuai could be ostracised and branded as a rightist for daring to challenge Mao, then no-one could be sure of their position. There was nothing to stop other, more junior officials, from attacking political rivals in a similar manner. Personal incentives and the fear of losing power meant that honest accounting during disastrous periods like the Great Leap was unlikely to take place. It was politically expedient instead to ‘pass the buck’ and blame another individual or group, or, as was often the case, to simply not report the reality of what was happening in the factories and fields at all (Bachman, 2006, Dikötter, 2011, Karl, 2010, Yang, 1998). The absence of accountability ultimately meant that there was not an adequate means of transmitting signals to the political centre (Ali, 2010: 149-150).

The political centre also however left a lot to be desired in its whimsical policy changes and in-fighting, much of which Mao deserves blame for initiating. Whilst the dialectical model of resolving tensions and implementing policy may well have been rooted in reasoning through problems in Marxist philosophy, there is little doubt that Mao also stood to benefit politically. His position of authority meant that he was not subject to the process, but could stand apart from it whilst the Maoist/radical and bureaucratic/conservative factions fought one-another. The radicals could be used to do the ‘heavy hitting,’ targeting Mao’s political opponents; conservative bureaucrats concerned with political stability could be entrusted with administration, whilst radicals - ‘institutionalized rebels’ as Andreas terms them - were also injected into institutions to check the power of the bureaucrats and pressure them into following Mao’s agenda (Andreas, 2009: 156-158 & 271).

In many instances this did not go to plan and the actions of radicals exceeded Mao's original intentions, but the genius of the whole scheme then lay in Mao's ability to intervene as the calming voice of reason, almost as a spiritual leader, above petty political squabbles, admonishing his fellow leaders and the masses for not implementing his instructions adequately (Mao, 1970c, Russo, 2005).

### **3.4. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution**

Harking back to the foundational influence of the New Philosophy, Mao's personal authority and the ultimate centrality of the party-state are prominent during the years of the Cultural Revolution.

As I noted earlier in this chapter, Russo speaks of the importance of the 'declaratory essence of politics' – that self-affirmed ideological matrix around which subjective positions adhere, but there is a danger in taking the various actors in a struggle such as the Cultural Revolution at their word (Russo, 2006: 677). Russo himself, in another text, provides evidence for the contradiction between Mao's statements and behavior, as I will discuss below (Russo, 2005). The Cultural Revolution was notable for its factional violence, and that was no doubt abetted to a significant degree by the fluidity of class rhetoric and political ideology more generally, which followed from voluntarism. There was never then the kind of consistent unity of purpose that characterised the CPSU through the implementation of the New Philosophy during the years of Stalin's rule, but the recourse to party unity as a kind of reactionary response remained important in China.

The process of grass-roots attacks on local party structures was to be one of the prime characteristics of the Cultural Revolution years. Mao's May 16<sup>th</sup> Notification from 1966 is

often taken as an unambiguous start point, at which Mao declares the justifications for and commencement of the Cultural Revolution, but doing so is problematic as we can trace earlier roots. What is important in the May 16<sup>th</sup> Notification though, and is illustrative of the sentiment that mobilised the Red Guards, is Mao's argument that an enormous conspiracy was unfolding, led by Nationalist, Soviet, Western and Japanese agents (Andreas, 2007, Charles, 1961, Rice, 1974, Weiran, 1996). The extent to which this was a fiction wholly manufactured by Mao is controversial, but what is clear is the personal political rivalries and preceding context that underpinned it. In the prevailing political climate of 1960s China such arguments held much currency.

The Great Leap had resulted in sustained criticism of Mao. At the eighth plenum of the Central Committee at Lushan in August 1959 wherein Peng Dehuai criticised Mao and was purged, an unprecedented number of senior officials were also dismissed. Mao had cleverly allowed sustained criticism of his leadership to take place during the meeting, exposing many individuals before they were attacked (Charles, 1961: 64).

Most damagingly of all though for Mao and the wider party was Peng's allegation that communist rule had not raised the standard of living of the masses as was claimed, but instead, peasants were faced with near-starvation (Charles, 1961: 68). After Peng was sent for 're-education,' an official response from the party gradually filtered out to the rest of the country through the press, gradually becoming more vicious in tone. Editorials denounced 'rightists' and defended Mao's leadership as essential to the "success of the revolution". Although no mention was made of Peng's claims about economic policy and living standards, criticism was made of links between the rightists and the Soviet Union – reference to a letter that Peng had sent to the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, denouncing



his own government's economic policy (Charles, 1961: 68-69, 70-71 & 74). Peng's letter was central in reinforcing the Sino-Soviet diplomatic split, and subsequent to it, critics of Mao would be branded as Soviet agents, and a threat to the nation (Charles, 1961: 74-75).

The dismissal of Peng brought a wave of sustained criticism of Mao. In particular, the popular play *Hai Jui Dismissed from Office* by Wu Han, first performed by Beijing Opera in 1961 (and run for four years continuously), was interpreted as a criticism of Mao and defence of Peng (Rice, 1974: 176, 186 & 187). The play became part of a much broader struggle due to Wu's personal association with Peng, and the President Liu Shaoqi's support of Peng, whilst both Liu and Peng were accused of being Soviet supporters. Liu was Mao's most powerful critic as Chairman and attacks on Wu by Maoists became a means of undermining the position of Liu (Rice, 1974: 184, 185, 189 & 204). Wu Han was imprisoned, where he died in 1969, whilst Peng and Liu, who was subsequently also purged, were later rehabilitated in the post-Cultural Revolution years (Karl, 2010, Rice, 1974).

During the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1957 Mao had also encouraged a campaign of *dazibao* by intellectuals attacking 'bureaucratism, sectarianism and subjectivism', but when posters more generally critical of government emerged Mao was infuriated and branded them as 'rightist' (Sheng, 1990: 236-237). The Hundred Flowers Movement and *Hai Jui* controversy were demonstrative of an authoritarian impulse that was to characterise the mass line during the Cultural Revolution, defending Mao and deferring to his authority, whilst attacking his critics.

During the Cultural Revolution a precedent for such behaviour was set by Beijing students

from Beida University who in June 1966 produced a radio broadcast and dazibao attacking the university leadership and local party officials responsible for education. Similar actions followed in subsequent years but were always restrained by both a loyal defence of Mao and the Central Committee, only targeting lower rungs of the party, which were said to evince ‘bourgeois ideas’ (Weiran, 1996: 172-173 & 174).

Both critics and supporters of Mao have brought attention to the ideological problems that were brought by this demagoguery in the years prior to, and during the Cultural Revolution. For Wang Hui (2006) it ultimately led to a de-politicisation and ‘hollowing-out’ through which as class rhetoric was not connected to a firmly materialist understanding of class position it could then be used on a whim to stigmatise individuals for the most banal reasons. Patrick Cavendish and Jack Gray, who on the whole took a very sympathetic stance towards Maoist arguments about the reassertion of bureaucratic power in the years immediately prior to the Cultural Revolution, themselves noted that the Maoists were keen to promote romanticised narratives of popular struggle, disconnected from the facts (Cavendish and Gray, 1968: 83).

“The purpose of criticism and the trend of Maoist thinking since 1964 has been to extrude from this myth any complications, equivocations and nuances in order to enhance its power” (Cavendish and Gray, 1968: 89-90).

Mao’s recorded speeches and public declarations during the early years of the Cultural Revolution demonstrate the validity of Cavendish and Gray’s assessment. Mao used essentialised notions of class struggle, binary distinctions and emotive rhetoric. It was a rhetoric that was designed to incite revolution or mob violence depending on one’s point of

view. It is worth reflecting on the violent character of Mao's discourse, as well as the manner in which he constantly grounds the legitimacy of his political pronouncements in notions of popular will and the mass-line. He made the case that any political leader who stood against his own position was standing against the people, as the following comments made to senior party leaders in July 1966 demonstrate:

"I tell you that the young people are the main force of the great Cultural Revolution! We must fully mobilize them... Who are against the great Cultural Revolution? American imperialism, Russian revisionism, Japanese revisionism, and the reactionaries... we must depend on the masses, trust the masses, and fight to the end. We must be prepared for the revolution to hit at us. The leadership of both the party and government must be so prepared and the responsible members of the party must also be so prepared... Only in this way can we [members of the party] catch up. Otherwise [the revolution] can depend only on those outside [the party]... It will not do to impose restrictions on the masses" (Mao, 1970c: 24-25).

Following the descent into factional violence Mao's rhetoric changed somewhat in that he now presented the Red Guard as more of a problem that must be solved within the party, positioning himself away from both his party colleagues and the Red Guards, with the intimation that he was the only one who could correct the course of the Cultural Revolution, and mediate between the various actors. The continuing centrality of the mass-line must be noted however. The provocations of the Red Guard that he had incited and the role of mass-action were a means of admonishing political rivals and also of imposing his own will on a divided party, as comments made to party leaders in October 1966 demonstrate:

“...the great Cultural Revolution raised havoc... It was done in a short space of time... It is not surprising that many comrades have not yet grasped its meaning... there were many articles and directives from the centre which failed to attract much attention... the Red Guards attacked and they succeeded in attracting attention. It is impossible to ignore them. The revolution has come to your doorstep... But the lost initiative can be recovered. But if you follow the old regulations, preserve the *status quo*, and let one faction of the Red Guards support you and another oppose you, I do not think the situation will change or improve” (Mao, 1970b: 42-44).

In a sign of the splits between students and workers that were to emerge in the 1980s, some of the fiercest violence took place on the campuses of Beijing universities. On July 27<sup>th</sup> 1968, workers, mobilised by Mao, invaded Tsinghua University to stop violence between two student Red Guard factions and were attacked with five killed and hundreds wounded before they were able to disarm the students (Russo, 2005: 536). Mao met with the powerful leaders of the student factions afterwards. As Russo has shown, the discussion during that meeting in 1968 demonstrated his paramount concern with maintaining CCP unity under his own personal authority, which was respected by the Red Guards. Mao mocked the rationales of the various Red Guard factions with regards to who was more ‘right’ or ‘left’, whilst famously stating that he was the ‘black hand’ who had sent the workers onto the campus (Russo, 2005: 540 & 543-44). He also however continued to use the Red Guards to challenge his party colleagues, denouncing the rhetoric they directed towards student leaders in the meeting (Russo, 2005: 539 & 546). For Russo, the decision by Mao to send the workers onto the campus involved something of a ‘strategic retreat’ in which Mao could shift the ideological terrain back towards key Marxist-Leninist principles, following the ‘depoliticised’ violence of the Red Guard factions. The central

issue then became one of the relationship between the ‘worker base’ and socialist party-state (Russo, 2005: 564-565). However, the evidence demonstrates that ‘politicisation’ took place on Mao’s terms and in his interests.

### **3.4.1. The Reform of the Universities**

The 1968 meeting is an important turning point in the Cultural Revolution, as for a period Mao’s followers gained the upper hand in their attempts to rein in bureaucratic power. Joel Andreas has given an incredibly detailed account of the reform of the universities during this period, with a specific focus on Tsinghua. Workers’ propaganda teams were despatched to universities such as Tsinghua to attempt to reform the education system, resulting in a series of radical experiments over the following years to curb the power of ‘bourgeois intellectuals’. Many students and staff members were sent to work on farms in rural areas and/or urban SOEs, whilst many were labelled as ‘class enemies’. Workers were placed in a powerful position in which they supervised university life (‘mass supervision’), and were as a result often resented by intellectuals. Workers from farm-communes, SOEs and members of the military were also sent to study at the universities and organisational structures were changed to give this new cadre of students loyal to the party a greater say in the running of the university (Andreas, 2009: 50, 138-139, 144, 147 & 168).

Andreas argues that the kind of ferment that was deliberately provoked within the university system gives an insight into the broader phenomenon of factionalism during the Cultural Revolution. He notes that rather than seeing factional struggle as the result of policy failure and fierce struggles for power, we should instead understand it to have been a programme that was intended to further the ends of Maoist ideology:

“This scenario places the factional rivalry that dominated political life in China during the late Cultural Revolution years, which has conventionally been treated as a struggle for succession, in a different light. Perhaps this contention was not simply a means to an end, but an end in itself” (Andreas, 2009: 157).

However, the power of the workers’ propaganda teams became entrenched at Tsinghua – they were the only group exempt from criticism – ultimately reinforcing a top-down model of rule. The Maoist goal had been a class ‘levelling’, and an erosion of the distinctions between manual and intellectual labour. In a perverse manner this may have ultimately contributed to an acceleration of the power of technocrats in the post-Cultural Revolution years, as academic study became less ‘abstract’ and more concerned with economic development (Andreas, 2009).

Mao’s policies in the final years of his life, which demonstrate a concerted attempt to perpetuate Maoist ideology, therefore made possible the reform process that was to follow under Deng. The stage had been set for a very instrumentalist form of ideology that privileged the development of the state. Workers, peasants and soldiers had new educational opportunities afforded to them, whilst intellectuals were given new forms of technical proficiency in agriculture, engineering and industry. Mao’s emphasis on party unity and the power of propaganda teams also provided a new structure of top-down control. An elite-controlled and technocratic model of education from 1976 onwards then replaced the class ferment of the Maoist era and universities became a central plank in the pursuit of economic development (Andreas, 2009, Vogel, 2011, Yang, 1998).

### 3.4.2. New Lines of Struggle

During the Cultural Revolution the kinds of political imaginaries that were deployed by the activists/Red Guards and the party leadership owed a great deal to a preceding legacy of class conflict in the collective communist memory, and in particular the Paris Commune received a good degree of attention from both students and workers. In many ways the Paris Commune was ideologically safe and somewhat neutral. It sat outside of Chinese politics and society, just as the Chinese Cultural Revolution did for the French Maoists, occluding many of the underlying tensions and contradictions in Maoist ideology.

The ‘Sixteen Articles’ (‘The Resolution of the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the CCP’) from August 1966 was the primary programmatic communiqué for the Cultural Revolution. It was fundamentally divisive in its description of Chinese society, with academics and the education system singled out for particularly strong criticism:

“...Comrade Mao Tse-Tung said: To overthrow a political power, it is always necessary, first of all, to create public opinion, to do work in the ideological sphere... Although the bourgeoisie has been overthrown, it is still trying to use the old ideas, culture, customs and habits of the exploiting classes to corrupt the masses, capture their minds and endeavour to stage a comeback. The proletariat must do just the opposite: it must meet head-on every challenge of the bourgeoisie in the ideological field and use the new ideas, culture, customs and habits of the proletariat to change the mental outlook of the whole of society. At present, our objective is to struggle against and crush those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road, to criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois academic ‘authorities’ and the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes and

to transform education, literature and art and all other parts of the super-structure that do not correspond to the socialist economic base, so as to facilitate the consolidation and development of the socialist system” (Mao, 1970a: 117-118).

The Sixteen Articles, despite eulogising mass-action, have a quite explicit theme running throughout, one that displays an attempt at ideological policing from the centre. This runs counter to Badiou’s characterisation of it as “a pure and simple call for free revolt” (Badiou, 2010: 119). Badiou is selective in his reading of the document, arguing that the text calls for ‘mass democracy’ that will destroy “the political monopoly of the party” (Badiou, 2010: 123).

The document states that the outcome of the Cultural Revolution will be determined by the extent to which “the party leadership does or does not dare boldly to arouse the masses” (Mao, 1970a: 119). The masses and ‘vigorous’ youth are exalted as the ‘main force’ and it is argued that they need freedom and space to take the initiative in order to ‘educate themselves’. The message to the Party is that it should not be afraid of ‘disorder,’ and that “any method of doing things on their [the masses] behalf should not be used” (Mao, 1970a: 118 & 120).

However, there are lengthy instructions for Party leaders at all levels on how they should behave in giving ‘correct leadership’ to the masses. Strict distinctions are made between ‘good’, ‘comparatively good’, mistaken and ‘anti-party’ cadres, whilst frequent reference is made to what constitutes ‘ideological errors’ (Mao, 1970a: 120 & 122-123).



Badiou casually dismisses these attempts at reasserting central control within the document with the very Maoist implication that a secretive cabal of bureaucrats is responsible. It is not though a conclusion that is in keeping with what we know about the ordering impulses that lie at the heart of Maoism itself, and central to which is Mao's own position (Andreas, 2002, Andreas, 2007, Badiou, 2010: 124).

There is a clear attempt to institutionalise the Cultural Revolution from the outset, with the argument in the text of the Sixteen Articles that the process will take "a very, very long time", and that therefore "the cultural revolutionary groups, committees and congresses should not be temporary organizations but permanent, standing mass organizations" (Mao, 1970a: 123). It is also noteworthy in that for what is ostensibly a 'cultural revolution', which would be expected to operate across all levels of society, that so much attention is focused upon correct leadership and the institutions of state. The strong focus on academic institutions and practices, in particular, runs counter to the notion of self-education for the masses: "In every kind of school we must apply thoroughly the policy advanced by Comrade Mao Tse-tung..." (Mao, 1970a: 122, 123, 124 & 125).

The Paris Commune provides something of a counterpart vague and utopian panacea that distracts from the continuing centrality of the party-state to the Maoist project, arousing the passions of revolutionary students and workers. The Commune was explicitly mentioned in the Sixteen Articles as a model for the organisation of the various revolutionary committees, a reference that particularly enthuses Badiou (Badiou, 2010: 123). It is of course at odds with much of what appears elsewhere in the document. That the party hierarchy had publicly invoked and legitimised the Paris Commune was very important however in that it allowed students and workers to appeal to it without fear of rebuke

(Mao, 1970a: 123). Whether that deployment of the memory of the Paris Commune was also though ‘hollowed-out’ politically as a result is of course an important question.

These issues see their fruition most notably in the short-lived Shanghai People’s Commune of 1967. Badiou sees it as representative of the true revolutionary potential in the Cultural Revolution, it is though itself marked by important contradictions. Many of the arguments made in the Sixteen Articles about the targets of the Cultural Revolution are accepted and operationalised, with Mao himself eulogised – “the invincible thought of Mao Zedong” as one publication put it; however, at the same time the appeals to the maintenance of the primacy of the CCP are disregarded. Workers take the lead in establishing the Commune, with self-conscious appeals to the earlier Paris Commune, and we see a forceful attack on the local structures of CCP rule: “We have smashed the old Shanghai municipal party committee and people’s congress” (Perry, 1999: 360-361).

The principle of self-rule, external to the Party, guided the Commune, which was suspicious of the military and developed its own militias. Membership was broadened beyond the initial groups of workers who had established the Commune to include a wide range of revolutionary organisations. This political novelty was to be short lived however following Mao’s intervention. He personally criticised the break with the Party and demanded the Commune's transformation into the ‘Shanghai Revolutionary Committee’ in which the CCP and military were guaranteed equal representation. Perry notes that despite its short life the Commune came to serve as an inspiration to later worker dissidence and it coincided with an increased prominence for workers in local Party structures across China (Perry, 1999: 361-362 & 363-364).

This is a significant point to which I shall return below, but it is important to make a number of points: through their acquiescence and statements the workers displayed an attitude of deference towards Mao as an individual charismatic figurehead, and in the post-Cultural Revolution period the party lacked such a leader; the attitude of the workers towards Mao was decidedly reactionary, and it echoes Badiou's worryingly authoritarian recent defence of the 'Master' as the bridge that allows the subject to practice fidelity to the event. In the case of the Shanghai Commune, it is ultimately fidelity to the Master – Mao – which blocks the resistance of the workers. To quote Badiou in full:

“The Master is the one who helps the individual to become subject. That is to say, if one admits that the subject emerges in the tension between the individual and the universality, then it is obvious that the individual needs a mediation, and thereby an authority, in order to progress on this path. One has to renew the position of the master – it is not true that one can do without it, even and especially in the perspective of emancipation” (Badiou quoted in Žižek, 2014: 147-148).

The fidelity of the Shanghai workers to the Paris Commune is therefore limited: it does not translate into a rearguard action against the state. It is important to consider the balance of force – the weight of the state of the situation – and Mao's threat of force, but submission in the face of such overwhelming force is not always an inevitability, and so it is right that we bring attention to why it did not happen. *In 1989 the workers did not acquiesce to the demands of the state.* Students and intellectuals who had been marked out as dissidents during the Maoist period, had a deferential attitude towards the state in 1989, as I will detail below and in the following chapters, but they were also keen to publicly portray a distancing from the party leadership – to try and show that they were not subject to

manipulation. This is in marked contrast to the Cultural Revolution, wherein the Red Guards and other activists fell over themselves to declare their fealty to Mao. The Shanghai Commune is therefore not so much a positive symbol of revolutionary potential, but instead, its function is precautionary, demonstrating the power of the party-state to co-opt a revolutionary movement, which seeks to exceed its organisational framework.

### **3.5. Nomination and the Changing Nature of Dissent**

Whilst the Cultural Revolution was notable for its factional struggle, new ‘lines in the sand’ were drawn in the 1980s. Both Stalinism and Maoism lost much of their appeal. As such, Russo acknowledges that the Cultural Revolution was vital in clearing the way for a new economic order:

“The programs that Deng Xiaoping and his associates wrote in 1975, during their struggle against the Maoists, have been the operative basis of what they have done in the following decades. In contrast, the policies Deng and other Mao’s opponents advocated before 1966, rather than an anticipation of the economic policies of the 1980s, were a Chinese version of the Soviet impasse of those years. Without the Cultural Revolution, it is unlikely that China would have gained ten years of development and prosperity, but it is more probable that its present conditions would be much worse than those of the former Soviet Union today” (Russo, 2006: 276).

Mass supervision left a bitter legacy of resentment for many of those who ascended the post-Cultural Revolution class hierarchy. Capitalist economic reforms allowed historically-rooted defamatory rhetoric towards urban SOE workers, poor in the cities and peasants in

rural areas to be reintroduced alongside new rationales. Whilst in the preceding decades communist ideology in its different variants had formed the basis for divisions between rival factions within the state, in the 1980s new socio-economic conditions and political rationales rooted in the market brought changes in the nature of dissent and new social cleavages (Barme, 1992, Li, 1996, Li, 2008, Mobo, 1994, Yanqi, 1995).

In 1981 the CCP officially blamed the initiation and subsequent failures of the Cultural Revolution on Mao's failure to remain true to the party-state's Maoist ideology. It was argued that Mao had deviated from the correct ideological path, misinterpreting divisions and struggles in Chinese society. In a lengthy pronouncement 'Left errors' were repeatedly singled out. Mao was accused of fermenting class struggle where it did not exist, and ignoring 'objective economic laws'. It was argued that class struggle had essentially ended with the anti-Rightist movement, and that it was therefore a Maoist fiction in the subsequent years. The distinction that Mao drew between bourgeoisie and proletariat was now said to be erroneous, and instead that the only distinction that mattered was between modern production and backwards production (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1981, Mobo, 1994: 17):

"...Comrade Mao Zedong widened and absolutized the class struggle, which exists only within certain limits in socialist society, and carried forward the viewpoint he had advanced after the anti-Rightist struggle in 1957 that the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie remained the principal contradiction in our society. He went a step further and asserted that, throughout the historical period of socialism, the bourgeoisie would continue to exist and would attempt a comeback and become the source of revisionism inside the Party" (Central Committee of the

Communist Party of China, 1981).

The new capitalist economic reforms that had been initiated by the party showed how empty this rhetoric was as social cleavages were widened. For those who stood to gain from the new economic order, the language of contemporary capitalism provided a means of stigmatising workers and peasants. SOEs and welfare had led to a bloated state and lazy workforce it was now argued, whilst entrepreneurs and intellectuals had been penalised by socialism. Li Minqi, who had been involved in the Tiananmen protests and was arrested in 1990 and subsequently imprisoned notes that there was a marked shift to the right amongst Chinese academics during the mid-late 1980s. Free-market ideology became fashionable in intellectual circles and Mao was now viewed as an “ignorant, backward Chinese peasant” (Li, 2008: xi). He adds:

“We were convinced that the socialist economy was unjust, oppressive, and inefficient. It rewarded a layer of privileged, lazy workers in the state sector and ‘punished’ (or at least undercompensated) capable and smart people such as entrepreneurs and intellectuals, who we considered to be the cream of society. Thus, for China to have any chance to catch up with the West, to be ‘rich and powerful,’ it had to follow the free market capitalist model. State-owned enterprises were by nature inefficient and should all be privatized. State-sector workers should be forced to participate in market competition and those who were incapable, too lazy, or too stupid, should just be abandoned” (Li, 2008: x).

Students and academics viewed their own programme in 1989 as an intensification of that already initiated by the party leadership. The Secretary General of the official All-China

Student's Federation, for example, spoke about how the measures advanced by the students conformed with the government's "objective of promoting the stability and development of the country" (Zhongguo, 1989: 10). As Melanie Manion noted in a 1990 edited collection on the Tiananmen protests, the students could quite justifiably understand themselves to be playing a legitimate role in giving a 'helping hand' to the reform process:

"Corruption among officials, press freedom, and education were major issues on the official reform agenda and extensively discussed in the official Chinese press. In voicing their demands, then, for the most part student protesters were not presenting an inherently subversive program" (Manion, 1990: xvii-xix).

The rhetoric of intellectuals was however marked by a fierce opposition towards those they perceived to be lower on the social hierarchy. An article by Perry Link in *The New York Review of Books* from 1989, for example, describes a conference from April of that year - when the protests were in 'full-swing' - attended by numerous prominent Chinese dissidents. Link details how one attendee, Wang Ruoshui, railed against 'a peasant party' that "had come out of the hills", subordinating the Chinese intellectual, whilst another, Liang Congjie, worried about the prospects of 'nationwide chaos' from a million strong 'hooligan element' (Link, 1989).

The usage of the terms 'liumang' and 'pizi' - highly derogatory and emotive terms for urban poor - at the 1990-1991 trial of Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao, two prominent democracy activists arrested for their involvement in the Tiananmen protests, is indicative of the attitude of many of the protesters. At the trial Chen noted that one of the central elements behind the 'new thinking' they had advocated in 1989 was that the elite "accept

the moral duty of rebuilding the cultural superstructure and opposing the tide of *liumang* and *pizi* culture as well as vulgarization” (Barne, 1992: 30).

Barne notes that the term ‘liumang’ has a notable history in contemporary Chinese urban life, beginning with Nineteenth Century Shanghai, where it was first used to label “the rootless rowdies and petty criminals who plagued the growing port city”. The use of liumang as a derogatory label has remained strong in the years since, becoming widespread (Barne, 1992: 29-30). The term ‘pizi’ has similar connotations to liumang, though Barne notes that it also implies “a kind of cleverness and intelligence; in certain contexts, ‘smart-arse’ is a suitable rendering” (Barne, 1992: 34). He adds:

“Disdain for the ‘vulgar masses’ and warnings against the inroads of popular culture (*tongsu wenhua*) on ‘serious’ and committed culture (*yansu wenhua*) has been the theme of much debate in popular China” (Barne, 1992: 29-30).

During the 1989 Tiananmen protests workers and poor were verbally attacked and forced to the margins by students. Anita Chan and Zhu Xiaoyang have described how non-students were able to participate in the initial stages of the protests, but were then forced out as the students literally closed ranks, forming a line of pickets around the square, only admitting fellow students and journalists, whilst likewise protecting their marches with a line of student guards holding hands either side of the marchers (Chan and Zhu, 2001: 4-5 & 10). The students also verbally attacked what was described as ‘low-level citizenry’ and ‘riff-raff’ (Chan and Zhu, 2001: 9-10). Chan and Zhu add:



“...any speechmaker who did not look like a student or who spoke with the accent of an out of-towner would be booed down and sent packing by his student listeners” (Chan and Zhu, 2001: 3).

It was not just the workers and poor who bore the brunt of the students’ rhetoric, but the government was targeted as well. Whilst the death of Hu Yaobang had been a trigger for the start of the protests, his memory became a means of criticising other party leaders. One poster in the square described Hu as a ‘true’ leader and stated that other ‘false’ leaders were still alive. There was a perception that Hu had been a man of honour and integrity. He had been ousted as General Secretary of the Central Committee in 1987 amongst a struggle over the pace of the reform process, which he was accused of having accelerated too rapidly. He had also played a significant role in rehabilitating figures who had been marginalised and denounced during the Cultural Revolution, and was said to have defended the popular essayist and dissident Liu Binyan who had been attacked repeatedly throughout the communist era, before eventually being dismissed from the party following his support for student protests in 1986. Hu was therefore something of a hero for Chinese dissidents and intellectuals, and he was contrasted against an old guard of corrupt leaders by the student protesters (Sampson, 1989). One student, for example, quoted in *The Independent*, stated that: “If you steal a few thousand yuan you get executed, if you steal a million yuan you can sit on the Politburo” (Higgins, 1989). In an interview with an “unnamed leadership member of the Chinese Independent Association of University Students” from the 23rd of April in the French newspaper *Libération*, the message was similar:

“LIBERATION: Is there another communist leader who, like Hu Yaobang, could

represent change and democratization in your eyes?

X: No. But the real problem lies in the system. We are not placing our hopes in a *deus ex machina*” (*Libération*, 1989: 9).

Despite their anger towards the CCP and workers most student protesters were keen to emphasise that they were not radically subversive or revolutionary. Instead they viewed themselves as a responsible and legitimate vanguard of change. When asked explicitly “do you want the CPC [Communist Party of China] to abandon power” the protest leader interviewed by *Libération* stated that: “There is no other party capable of running the country. We think democratization is possible with the CPC in power” (*Libération*, 1989: 9). A number of writers on Tiananmen have described this as the sense of entitlement of students and academics, and there were certainly allegations that student leaders were seeking to gain personally from the protests, with huge financial donations from Hong Kong disappearing, and foreign press being charged for interviews (Chan and Zhu, 2001, Feigon, 1990, Schell, 1995, Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993). As one participant noted:

“From time to time, I also observed instances of students copying the corruption and prerogatives of power, even though this type of corruption of power among China’s political leaders had elicited such righteous condemnation from students during the protest movement. During the periods of the hunger strike and the curfew, the student leaders I came across all had large retinues and were protected by a number of household retainer-like bodyguards. What disgusted me most was how some of the student leaders, whether healthy or weak, liked to lean on the shoulders of two bodyguards for support” (Chan and Zhu, 2001: 13).

We can though connect this sense of entitlement to a longer lineage of student protest of which the students themselves were well aware, and as a result understood themselves to be the legitimate standard bearers of Chinese patriotism and a vanguard of change. There is a lengthy history of Chinese student protest that is connected to elite politics and Tiananmen Square (as I will discuss further in the following chapter). In the Imperial era annual entrance examinations for the bureaucracy brought thousands of students to major Chinese cities to vie for a limited number of jobs. Orgies of looting and violence were common as students ran amok, and rival political factions were keen to use what essentially amounted to a street army of thousands of students for their own ends (Feigon, 1990: 2-3 & 6). Student activism was at the heart of the advent of the CCP, and the nationalist 1919 May Fourth Movement which in many ways served as its precursor, opening a new intellectual and political space (Feigon, 1990: ix, 11-12 & 14).

The language of the nationalist May 4th Movement of 1919 was used by the students, with its slogan of ‘democracy and science’ (Calhoun, 1989: 29-30). At the time it was a modernist attack on confucianism, and there are parallels with 1989 wherein the students also saw in the CCP a weak and atrophied state which needed to be modernised. One of the student protesters told the American writer and filmmaker Lee Feigon that:

“We are... creating a new May Fourth movement. This one will be much more difficult to implement than the last one. In the 1920s and 1930s it was only necessary to make the masses conscious of foreign invaders about to take over their country. This was relatively easy. They already feared and hated foreigners. But this time we must teach them about democracy. That will be very difficult. It will take many years” (Feigon, 1990: 131-132).

Nationalism was also an important part of student politics in the late 1980s. December 1988 and January 1989 saw riots in Nanjing and protests in other Chinese cities against African students who had been encouraged to study in China during the Maoist period. There was anger against Africans who were taken to be benefitting from privileged treatment. That combined with the students' own sense of patriotism, and anger towards the CCP, resulting in lynch mobs on university campuses. The violent protests also connected to support for democratic and legal reforms, as it was argued that the rights of Chinese students were being infringed in favour of the Africans – based upon false rumours of rape and murder at the hands of Africans. The anti-African protests were indicative of what was to follow a few months later in Tiananmen Square in that it demonstrated the potent combination of nationalism and pro-democracy protest (Sullivan, 1994).

In 1989 the students were keen to emphasise that they were not being manipulated by elites, but as Feigon notes, “there may have been a very thin line between their [the student's] so-called spontaneous actions and those prompted by higher authorities” (Feigon, 1990: 131). As such, the Secretary General of the CCP Zhao Ziyang was ousted during the protests for his support of the students, and some members of his inner circle were close to the protesters. Feigon further argues that the students in fact enjoyed considerable support within the various government ministries, and were only seriously opposed by a handful of senior officials such as Li Peng, Yang Shangkun and Deng Xiaoping. For Feigon this demonstrates the students' “abiding faith in government authority” (Feigon, 1990: 223).

The students were ultimately too steeped in nationalism, and too close to the elite, for us to understand much of their critical discourse as anything other than empty rhetoric. Despite student criticisms of the official Communist Youth League, for example, student organisations mimicked the hierarchical structure of the CCP. Dialogue with government was always emphasised (of which I will say more in the following chapter), and the students ultimately lacked the will to overturn the prevailing structures of power. It is not then ultimately surprising that in its first official response to the violence of 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> of June the CCP absolved the students of responsibility. The government used the same kind of liumang rhetoric as the students in blaming urban hoodlums and workers, arguing that they had attempted to stage a rebellion and had attacked the security forces (Xinhua, 1989).

### **3.6. Contradictions**

In considering the rhetoric of the students there are a number of pertinent issues that arise in relation to nomination. We have to ask if the Chinese students and intellectuals turning on Mao and the Cultural Revolution justifies some form of tenacious nomination in the other direction, through which we uphold a particular vision of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution as a propagandist tactic?

I think that instead we can make the case that doing so pushes us in the direction of what Badiou describes as a ‘simulacral event’ in *Ethics*, through which the void is ‘essentialised’ (Badiou, 2001: 72-73 & 74). As such, there is a serious risk that we reify a narrow reading of a binary distinction, eliding the multiplicity of political forms and contradictions that were present through the ‘Red Years’. There is much to suggest that this is just what Badiou’s reading of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism effectuates.

Badiou's claim that "the minority trend among the party cadres is at the same time led, or represented, by the person whose historical and popular legitimacy is the greatest, that is, Mao Zedong" (Badiou, 2010: 112), is highly questionable. Maoism was the governing ideology in China for a period of decades and Mao the most singularly powerful individual. As I noted earlier in this chapter Badiou unapologetically toes the party line, supporting Maoist rhetoric.

Elsewhere, he has spoken of the 'field of possibility' that is to be found in politics as different political imaginaries compete within the state (Badiou, 2004b: 154). If Maoism essentially constituted the state of the situation and the encyclopaedia of accepted referents, then it seems especially problematic to reproduce that discourse – that it might place a block on what is possible politically. His stance towards the Cultural Revolution in this regard is understandable in terms of the idea of the self-negation/dissolution of the 'class party' in *Theory of the Subject*, but it also seems anti-dialectical in that it fixes rupture to the dominant ordering ideology.

Militancy itself brings the violence of the fanatic, and a predominant focus on the forceful wrestling of politics from one order of truth into another can lead us to omit many of the subtler forms of struggle and change that take place over a longer timeframe (Wright, 2013: 19). Indeed, the designation of a dramatic moment of change is itself complicit in that struggle and change, as much as its adherents might try and position it above the fray, so to speak, as a kind of new political beginning. The winners naturally re-write legacies of struggle and conflict on their own terms. Communists are particularly expert at doing so, as the purging and subsequent rehabilitation of leaders testifies.

When a truth is said to be sustained by militancy we can also lose sight of the contested nature of truth formation in terms of splits amongst the revolutionaries, the manner in which their fidelity to a truth may be modified over time, and in terms of the reaction from the state. These relationships are even more important to consider in the case of an apparently ‘revolutionary’ communist party-state. When revolutionaries revolt against a particular vision of the revolution, we then have to enquire as to the precise nature of the political imaginaries that are at stake. As such, we must think about the ways in which utopian, revolutionary, reformist, and conservative imaginaries interact with one-another, the relationship they have with the state, and the role that factionalism plays – either in sustaining revolutionary energy or threatening it.

Badiou’s reticence to discuss issues of elite manipulation is marked in his portrayal of the Cultural Revolution, and hints at a naïve and romanticised reading of proletarian subjectivity. He argues that the Cultural Revolution severs the link between politics and the state for contemporary revolutionary politics (Badiou, 2010: 108). The rhetoric of students and intellectuals in the 1980s challenges such an assessment however. As does the politics of the Red Years, which if anything is a lesson as to the enduring power of the state, and its ability to co-opt the ‘heroic form of politics’.

As I have detailed above, the Cultural Revolution was part of a broader sequence characterised by a struggle between Maoists and Stalinists, institutionalised in the party-state and sanctioned by Maoist ideology. Personal rivalries existed within that context and Mao himself held a preeminent position as the figurehead and supreme ideologue of Chinese communism. Even when his role in the Cultural Revolution was repudiated by the party in 1981, the party still defended a caricature of Mao – Mao deviated from the true

path of Mao Zedong Thought it was argued. That characterisation of Maoism is though of course highly politically charged, and has been dismissed by Badiou as a propagandistic re-writing of history (Badiou, 2010: 105). When the party stated that Mao incorrectly differentiated between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and that the only distinction that truly mattered was between modern and outdated production practices they did Mao a disservice, for Maoism contained as much of a modernising agenda as the post-Cultural Revolution period, it was just of a different order to that advocated by the post-Cultural Revolution party elite (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1981). There is though a strong case to be made that the CCP statement in 1981 is closer to the true political significance of the Cultural Revolution and ultimately the nature of Maoism, than the vision portrayed by the French Maoists such as Badiou – that the essential struggle was for ownership of the state, not the dissolution of the state.

Scholars of Chinese communism and the Cultural Revolution have frequently brought attention to struggles over the ownership and direction of the state between the political campaigns and socio-economic engineering of the late-1950s through to the end of the Cultural Revolution and the advent of Deng's leadership. The personal rivalries, ideological debates, factional struggles and key events have been discussed at length over many decades now, in enormous depth. This immense weight of scholarship provides a challenge to Badiou's account of the Cultural Revolution, for it shows us that the terrain on which state power was reproduced during the Maoist period was a politics of rupture, one that instrumentalised towards that end, often with tragic effects, revolutionary energy, discord, change and struggle. These are all of the things that Badiou tells us give the Cultural Revolution its revolutionary potency as a symbol of politics outside of the hegemonic framework of the state. However, because Maoist dialectics with its



institutionalised ideological ferment was the hegemonic order of communication under which all sides were forced to operate, the natural counterpart to that model was always likely to be a politics of stability and pragmatism, and a kind of ideological ‘settlement’, which is what actually emerged in the 1980s under Deng’s leadership.

Badiou’s argument that the Cultural Revolution was the result of a contradiction between the mass-line and the party-state ultimately seems to be a gross reductionism (Badiou, 2010: 113-114). He implies that factionalism was an after-effect of this struggle and a distortion, but instead we can argue that factionalism was an inherent element of Maoist ideology. Mao himself understood this and was expert at playing Red Guard factions off against one-another as Russo has shown (2005). It thus seems problematic to set as many qualifications between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ factions as Badiou does. Factionalism has a logic of its own, one that carries inherent struggle, political opportunism, as well as tactical and ideological shifts. As a result, it also seems particularly strange for Badiou to try and locate and extract a purified militant ethic from the brute chaos and violence of the Cultural Revolution.

As such, Badiou claims that especially zealous followers of Mao demonstrated an ‘obscurantist’ rhetoric (Badiou, 2010: 150). There is a strong case though for saying that they are exemplary of the political logic that unfolds in the Cultural Revolution and are not a deviation. We can agree with Badiou that they did contribute towards a muting of the possibility of more meaningful political change emerging, but they were not alone in that regard. The deferential attitude towards Mao’s rule and state power was embedded in Maoist ideology.

In an interview with Bosteels, Badiou himself concedes that he thinks of “the flamboyant kind of Maoism from the period of the Cultural Revolution”, and that the *idea* of Maoism as an alternative to Stalinism was most important. It was thus through the subjective contrast with Stalinist formalism and the possibility of tying the two in a torsional ‘knot’, wherein “uncompromising formalism and the most radical subjectivism” could be productively entwined in a methodological sense. That this “goes completely against the grain of the Chinese political style” was beside the point (Bosteels, 2011: 296). Maoism therefore demonstrates for Badiou that a “formal political style” can be used to rhetorically “take charge of the situation in its entirety” (Bosteels, 2011: 297). This is an important point, for methodologically Badiou is talking of a brute forcing of the situation, but one that ultimately threatens an intensification of the state of the situation through its recourse to a formal established order of politics: Maoism.

The Cultural Revolution is though still important in what it signals for the possibility of an anti-state politics, just not so in the way that Badiou describes. Mao and the Red Guards made possible the advent of a new social, political and economic order that brought sharp cleavages in Chinese society and a sense of alienation from the party-state for Chinese workers, as I shall discuss in the following chapters. It also brought a change in the rhetorical tone of dissidence and activism. Whilst during the Cultural Revolution, contrary to what Badiou and Russo argue, dissidence had remained within the framework of the party-state, and was guided by loyalty to Mao, in the 1980s dissidents were keen to show that they were not subject to such manipulation, even if the reality in the case of students and intellectuals was far from that, and they remained committed to Chinese nationalism. Chinese workers on the other hand, because of the changes wrought by the Cultural Revolution and their experience of a state-led process of capitalist reform, were more

likely to take their resistance outside of a party-state-centric framework, beginning in the 1980s, as the encounter with a new political real made possible a new understanding of their worker subjectivity.

## 4. The Goddess of Democracy: Postmodern Protest and Tiananmen Square

### 4.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed problems associated with the declaratory nature of politics, and the manner in which designations of rupture may be tied to the state of the situation: in the first instance through a politics of rupture that furthers the ends of state ideology, as in the Cultural Revolution, and during the preceding years of Maoist rule; in the second instance through the retroactive memory of ‘chaos’ and ‘instability’, which is used to support a statist mode of politics, as in the case of the rhetoric of students, intellectuals and the CCP in the 1980s. In this Chapter I analyse the statist enclosure of the 1989 Tiananmen Protests in greater depth. I argue that limiting our focus to the institutional state and its powers of counter-nomination in the contemporary era of globalisation is however problematic, and that Badiou’s notion of ‘worlding’ provides a more all-encompassing framework for thinking through the theoretical problems associated with macro-scale global movements in contemporary politics. As in the case of the Cultural Revolution, parochial issues and political struggles within the state are still vitally important. However, notions such as ‘globalisation’, ‘neoliberalism’, the ‘post-political’, and issues of state-to-state diplomacy at the end of the Cold War and in the years since have come to provide an interpretive grid, which I argue ultimately *maintains the state of the situation*.

I noted in the previous chapter that during the Cultural Revolution and in the preceding years Mao used notions of external enemies to rally support, and during the 1980s Chinese nationalism figured prominently in student politics. In 1989 such binary distinctions between ‘communists’ and ‘capitalists/democrats’ provided the interpretive framework

that was initially used by those outside of China to interpret the protests, with comparisons made with the collapse of communist rule in Europe and the Soviet Union. When Tiananmen did not lead to the same outcome, academic commentators found their explanatory recourse in a ‘post-political’ or ‘postmodern’ framing of the protests. The protests have thus been explained-away through a causal historiography that emphasises the dissolution of values in Chinese society, as ‘subjects’ become ‘individuals’. The student protests have come to be equated with a lineage of European and North American subversive youth ‘counter-culture’ – Tiananmen is said to be akin to Woodstock and ‘60s anti-war protests. The student protest strategies have also been praised for the ‘performative’ immanent subversion of state power that they demonstrate. However, I argue that these strategies are petitionary towards established structures of state power and dependent upon the spatial hierarchies and communicative mechanisms that sustain them. By reducing protest to a globalised modality of ‘state-non-state’ opposition, the specific contradictions that might be radicalised by faithful subjects are occluded, and postmodern accounts of protest can reify the post-political world they purport to critique. In the following chapter I therefore provide an alternative account of the Tiananmen Protests through a focus on Chinese workers in 1989 and the years since through Badiou’s notion of the evental ‘encounter’.

## **4.2. Objects and Worlds**

As I noted in Chapter Two, *Logics of Worlds* sees an attempt by Badiou to introduce a theory of appearance – being-there – which moves away from the preeminent focus on nomination in *Being and Event*. This is a more impersonal logic of subject-formation through which a truth-procedure is defined in terms of a wider whole, but importantly, *without being reduced to it as a kind of secondary epiphenomenal effect*. I emphasise this

point because it has been an important part of Badiou's criticism of a kind of metaphysical monism, which he has argued is present in Deleuze's Spinozist philosophy, through which the eruption of multiplicity is always subordinated to the ordering logic of the One (Badiou, 2000, 2007b). Whether or not this is a fair portrayal of Spinoza and Deleuze is a subject that has been the centre of heated debate, and is beyond the scope of our discussion here (May, 2004, Roffe, 2012). However, the broader problematic of the relationship between worlds and their constituent parts as it functions in Badiou's philosophy, and specifically *Logics of Worlds*, is important for our purposes in terms of what it can tell us about fidelity and change.

This is because it provides a useful framework for investigating the manner in which designations of totalising structures, the state of the situation or 'worlds' can be complicit in reproducing a hegemonic order. In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou moves away from the focus on a stark subjective forcing that had characterised his earlier work. He introduces a focus on a certain kind of objectivity in describing the appearance of the constituent parts of a world and the relations between them. The 'objects' that comprise a world, Badiou notes, are logically situated within it: "there must exist a logical clause that links the nature of the object to the elements of the multiple-being of which it is the objectivation" (Badiou, 2009a: 195).

Badiou aims to show that distinctiveness can be maintained within a world as part of a world, without being subordinated entirely to the One-whole-structure. In this sense the transcendental that orders relations between the constituent parts of a world must necessarily be limited: "No world is such that its transcendental power can entirely de-realize the ontology of the multiple" (Badiou, 2009a: 196). The transcendental alone

cannot make an object appear as might be the case in a monist philosophy, or through an idealist focus on subjective experience wherein an object is an object in the mind or in a rhetorical framing only – appearing ultimately has “nothing to do with the subject” (objects are not ‘sense objects’ for Badiou) (Badiou, 2009a: 195). As a result, we must have an appreciation of ‘being-in-itself’ alongside ‘being-there’ – the dialectical relationship that I noted in Chapter Two. If we were to only focus on being-there, then any articulation of individual being would be solely defined in relation to the placement of being and the governing logic that orders that placement. The being of multiple-beings-as-a-world has a certain ontological life of its own, which must be recognised, but the same can be said of the constituent multiple objects that comprise the world (Badiou, 2009a: 194 & 196).

The issue of what binds politics is though somewhat problematic in Badiou’s work. Both Hallward and Toscano have emphasised the primacy of ‘unbinding’ in Badiou’s philosophy, i.e. that an ontology of substantive multiplicity subordinates relationality in favour of the infinite and unrepresentable (Hallward, 2003: 284-291, Toscano, 2004). In this reading we can note that there is something of a necessary tension between the demands of a generic truth-procedure and of a form of politics that is said to be predicated on an essential unbinding – just the kind of resistant politics that Badiou argues the Cultural Revolution has ushered in. If a generic truth speaks to a rarefied and abstracted political, is its relationship to the actual practice of politics purely then that of a kind of utopian imaginary? If so this seems to imply a separation of ‘truth’ and ‘procedure’, through which the two cannot meet – truth as ideational and rhetorical, a procedure as the lived real that political subjects encounter.

There is little doubt that competing notions of political possibility play an important role in providing the conditions that sustain and agitate for or against political change, and that, rhetorically at least, fidelity might follow from. However, as I showed in the previous chapter, the deployment of particular romanticised depictions of events (such as the Paris Commune or the Cultural Revolution) can be dangerous when they are abstracted and become the play thing of those in power. As such, they can provide a kind of de-politicised ‘cure-all’ that prevents engagement with deeper structural problems in the ideological field and in political economy.

Is it then the case that the void that is summoned by a subtractive politics is absolutised as a brute negation and hence the purification of a militant ethic, or can we think of subtraction in more immanent terms within a world? Whilst I detailed problems associated with the former in the previous chapter, here I wish to draw out some of the problems that can arise if we follow the latter approach and emphasise immanence.

There has been a tendency within contemporary readings of Badiou from the likes of Brassier, Toscano and Agamben to focus on an unbinding in contemporary global politics, through which the spread of ‘footloose’ capital depends upon the very kind of unbinding that Badiou has argued is the necessary condition of a resistant politics subsequent to the Cultural Revolution (Agamben, 1993, Brassier, 2004, Toscano, 2004). As such, the central problematic becomes the extent to which a generic truth can in a sense negate or productively mobilise the dispersion and differentiation that capital effectuates in the modern or postmodern world. There is a potential danger though that we internalise the divisive logic of contemporary capitalism as the foundational criteria for the emergence of new subjective forms. There is also the problematic manner in which we might



misconstrue the relationship between the distinct elements that comprise a totality and the totality itself. Worlding should not in this sense occlude the reality of the political decisions and brute violence that often underpin political change. We should therefore be wary of conflating particular instances of onto-political ordering with a kind of metaphysical totality.

To speak of immanence, we naturally imply a relationship with an order of appearance of some kind. As I noted above though, Badiou is right to point out that such an order of appearance should not be made the absolute measure of appearance, for we then absolutise the transcendental ‘indexing’ that if anything should be the target of a resistant politics. English-language framings of the 1989 Tiananmen protests are an excellent example with which we can think through these problems because they chart, in a chronological manner, the conceptual shift from a focus on an Enlightenment narrative of the triumphant march of consumerist rights and Western liberal democracy, to that of a post-political world in which alienation has been absolutised as the operative condition of politics. This is a particularly problematic area, which those of us who wish to think the emergence of political novelty today must negotiate. It is difficult to criticise the desire to bring to attention the exploitative macro-scale movements in the contemporary world and the assault that they have wrought upon many old sureties. This essentially emancipatory impulse is commendable.<sup>11</sup> There is though a very real danger that this critique operates within the framework of an encyclopaedia of established referents – and it may ultimately be that the more superstructural and ideological notion of the ‘encyclopaedia’ from *Being*

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<sup>11</sup> Although it can also see its expression in a reactionary politics that rejects the trappings of modernity wholesale, such as in neo-Nazism. Cf. GOODRICK-CLARKE, N. 2003. *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity*, New York, NYU Press.

*and Event* needs to be more concretely married to analysis of ‘indexing’ as it appears in *Logics of Worlds*. Doing so has the potential to help us investigate the manner in which communicative mechanisms are operative in ordering the constituent parts of a world, and how our own discourse may ultimately be complicit. The ultimate test though has to be the endurance of political novelty, which is why I discuss the legacy of grass-roots worker activism in 1989 in the next chapter.

### **4.3. Enlightenment Subjectivity and Epistemic Dissonance**

It is fair to say that confusion reigned amongst ‘China watchers’ in the English-speaking world in the months and years following Tiananmen. None of the predictions made at the time about the impending collapse of the CCP into factional infighting and the triumph of Western-style democracy have come to pass. Allegations that the country’s ‘gerontocratic leadership’ was clinging to communism at all costs – “the world’s last and most obstinate Communist stronghold” as one observer put it – seem woefully uninformed now. “Why should China be the exception?” quipped John Gittings of *The Guardian*; “just because Mr Deng has forgotten his Marxism, there is no reason why we should” (Gittings, 1992).

Commentators struggled to comprehend what was happening in China, largely, I would argue, because they paid scant attention to what was happening ‘on-the-ground’, and, instead, tried to explain through a wider framework, in the process bringing far too many of their own expectations and presuppositions to their analysis to be able to make a scholarly judgement. When trying to trace the conceptual development of thinking on Tiananmen during this period it can seem especially frustrating because of the immense proliferation of differing ‘expert’ analyses. If we dig beneath the surface however, examine the logics and rationales underlying the arguments made, and compare them against one-

another, we can begin to see commonalities emerge amongst these statements and the ways through which the arguments developed over time.

Much of the confusion in the aftermath of Tiananmen centred upon the Party inner-circle, with rumours of strife that were to an extent fuelled by a lack of knowledge of what was seemingly a ‘closed’ political system. A greater attentiveness could, however, have remedied many of these problems. In the days immediately following June 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> an official silence from the CCP no doubt fuelled the spurious rumours that were widely circulating within English-language news sources (Oksenberg and Sullivan, 1990: 359). An *ABC News* broadcast questioned whether Zhao Ziyang, the General Secretary of the CCP’s Central Committee, was still alive or being supported by military factions in the South of China, whilst others talked-up his prospects for a victorious return at the expense of his Party rivals (ABC, 1989, Bernstein, 1989, Salisbury, 1989).<sup>12</sup> Talk of a conflict between two PLA units was dismissed by the CCP in their first official response, but predictions of the impending collapse of the Party only seemed to grow stronger (Kristof, 1989, Yuan, 1990: 367). This public commentary centred in a large part on Deng himself, with predictions of turmoil and an end to one-party rule following his death (Southorn, 1991, Williams, 1990). For example, an editorial in *The Independent* noted: “Perhaps only with Deng’s death will it become apparent whether the main consequence of his actions at Tiananmen is a fear which pervades his Party’s power, or a hatred which destroys it” (Independent, 1989b). *The Times* (London) was more explicit: “The bloodshed will thus deepen divisions in the Chinese Government, in the Army, and the party itself... the

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<sup>12</sup> In 2009 a book was published based on a series of audio recordings made by Zhao detailing his opposition to the military crackdown, and his post-Tiananmen house arrest. Cf. ZHAO, Z. 2009. *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang*, New York, Simon & Schuster.

country is now at war with itself” (Times, 1989). In a speech before new members of the Central Politburo Standing Committee on June 16<sup>th</sup> Deng gave a direct response to commentary on his own demise:

“The US policy for China is based on whether I fall ill, or die. Many countries in the world also base their policy for China on my life... it is unhealthy and dangerous to base the fate of a country on the prestige of one or two persons... Once the new leadership is established, it must assume responsibility” (Deng, 1990:384).

A rigorous internal restructuring of the Party leadership was thus taking place in order to avoid any of the outcomes being predicted within English-language media, but it was not afforded significant attention within such publications. This is surprising as Deng’s speech, quoted above, was reproduced in a 1990 publication edited by eminent Sinologists – there was not a paucity of information coming out of China. As already noted, for a number of years after Tiananmen commentators continued to speak of a hardening of the leadership’s communist policies, whereas attention to Deng’s openly available June 9<sup>th</sup> speech to military units involved in the crackdown advocating the acceleration of the free-market economic reforms already underway – the ‘open policy’ as Deng himself termed it – would have yielded considerable insight (Deng, 1990: 377).

Comments made by President Bush in his first official press conference following the violence help demonstrate just why these details were overlooked. The President’s remarks did not diverge a great deal from other commentary at the time, stressing that an irreversible movement towards democracy had begun, but he was keen to emphasise a

greater degree of restraint than was being shown in the press: “I think the depth of the feeling towards democracy is so great that you can’t put the genie back in the bottle and return to total repression. And I think that what we’re seeing is a manifestation of that in the divisions within the PLA. But I certainly want to stop short of predicting a civil war between units of the People’s Liberation Army”. Also hinted at was a legacy of uniquely Chinese political manoeuvring when questioned as to which leaders were ‘up’ or ‘down’ following Tiananmen: “...I would remind you of the history. In the Cultural Revolution days. Deng Xiaoping – at Mao Zedong's right hand – was put out. He came back in 1976. He was put out again in the last days of Mao Zedong and the days of the Gang of Four. Then he came back in, and to his credit, he moved China towards openness, towards democracy, towards reform. And suddenly we see a reversal, and I don't think there's anybody in this country that can answer your question with authority at this point. It doesn't work that way in dealing with China” (Bush, 1989).

What we see in the President’s response therefore is an extrapolation from the particular – the apparently unique characteristics of Chinese politics – to a universal – the inevitability of China’s democratic conversion, but in doing so the specificities of CCP rule are not examined in-depth, ‘informed’ opinion instead deploying crude generalities about Chinese history and the nature of the Communist Party. This is the same discursive operation that is taking place when, the collapse of the CCP into factional infighting, or the rolling back of free-market reforms are spoken about. This was not merely wishful thinking in the media, nor confined to the official statements emanating from the White House, it also found its way into intelligence analysis – a CIA report predicted the disastrous effects of Tiananmen on future Chinese development (CIA, 1989).

The optimism about China's democratic future that manifested itself as an extreme pessimism towards any prospects for continued successful CCP rule is perhaps better understood when we place it in a wider context. When President Bush made the above comments he had just returned from a four-nation diplomatic tour, the subject of which had been the drawdown of conventional forces in Europe (Raum, 1989). Tiananmen came to be directly linked to subsequent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and this in turn fed back into commentary on China. The successes of anti-communist regime change in Europe in particular when pitted against the failure of Tiananmen resulted in stinging attacks on the Bush Administration. James Webb, a senior figure under Reagan, launched an especially bitter attack against the 'unprincipled' foreign policy of Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker, whilst the extension of Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) trade status to China provoked even more vitriol (Boudreau, 1991, Greenfield, 1989, McCurdy, 1991, Sonenshine, 1990, U.S.A. Today, 1989, Webb, 1991).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union only served to intensify the narrative line that China was veering towards hard-line communism – China's leaders were "vehemently opposed to private ownership" in the words of one commentator – and that the CCP was tearing itself apart, China's 'secretive political culture' merely concealing internal strife. This was no doubt abetted to an extent by the rhetoric emanating from some members of the CCP inner-circle, eulogising socialist principles, but it was no more reflective of actual Party policy than some of the hard-line rhetoric emanating from senior figures in the Bush Administration – both might best be seen as attempts to placate domestic critics (Gittings, 1991, Lubman, 1991, Sun, 1991). A line from David Warsh of *The Washington Post* seems to best reflect the prevailing opinion at the end of the Cold War: "These widely scattered and apparently diverse expressions of popular sentiment, from the streets of Leipzig to

Tiananmen Square... have in common a commitment to market processes... to the relatively decentralized and spontaneous framework for organizing work that we call ‘capitalism’ – in preference over central planning” (Warsh, 1991).

Therefore, when the Chinese authorities clamped down on such an expression it could only be understood as a resistance to market principles – there was no appreciation that they might exist independently of a triumphant Western liberal-democracy rooted in the European Enlightenment. This was the ‘end of history’ discourse that was to be advanced by Francis Fukuyama not long after, and another excellent example of it is to be found in discussions of the Goddess of Democracy statue in American government (Fukuyama, 1993). The Goddess first appears in the McNulty-Emerson Bill immediately after the end of the protests, a proposal for a privately funded facsimile statue to be created and gifted to China upon the success of ‘prodemocracy efforts’ in that country (U.S. House, 1989a). It re-emerges during the debates over the extension of MFN trade status to China, and in the legislative text “to designate the park located across from the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the District of Columbia, as ‘Tiananmen Square Memorial Park’” (U.S. House, 1989b). In the latter it is stated that: “The Chinese students erected a version of the Statue of Liberty in Tiananmen Square to express their fervent desire to bring democracy and freedom to their country”. The ‘Park Authorization Act’ is unique in officially enshrining the historical ‘facts’ of Tiananmen as perceived by the legislative branch of the American government: “These students demanded fundamental civil liberties such as those found in the United States Bill of Rights... timeless values that transcend political and national boundaries” (U.S. Senate, 1989).

#### 4.4. From the ‘End of History’ to the ‘Coming Community’

In one of the first books published on Tiananmen, *Crisis at Tiananmen: Reform and Reality in Modern China*, published in 1989, the authors Yi Mu and Mark Thompson argue that a direct precursor to the events of that year had been a series of protests demanding elections to select Party representatives on Chinese university campuses in 1979 and 1980. The wish of the students was granted and Yi and Thompson postulate that this became a seminal moment for a nascent democracy movement, instantiating a form of Western-style participatory democracy – a model that the students believed should be extended more widely in Chinese society. Yi and Thompson add that writers and thinkers of the French Enlightenment such as Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu provided the intellectual inspiration for the Chinese students (Thompson and Yi, 1989). However, elsewhere, in other academic publications from 1989, post-Tiananmen, a strikingly different argument is being made. In an article from the journal *Society* Craig Calhoun argues that the Tiananmen protesters’ understanding of ‘democracy’ was ‘nebulous and vague’. Calhoun was present in the Square during the protests and maintains that there was little mention of elections, only ill-defined demands for greater freedom of expression and association (Calhoun, 1989: 29-30).

Likewise, the British journalists Michael Fathers and Andrew Higgins who were also present at the culmination of the protests, in their book *Tiananmen: The Rape of Peking* argued that the very ‘vagueness’ of the students demands was the source of their popular support, meaning they could “accommodate every popular grievance” (Fathers and Higgins, 1989: 16). Calhoun notes that the ‘democracy and science’ slogan used by the protesters represented an appeal to Enlightenment positivism as opposed to Euro-American multi-party democracy, and, he also draws on Chinese history to support his argument,



arguing that the students were participating in a much longer Chinese intellectual tradition, describing how the same slogan was used during the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of 1919. Further, he adds that whilst an opening of China to foreign ideas was advocated, it was a general “Enlightenment emphasis on the importance of reason against the forces of superstition and ignorance” that mattered most to the students (Calhoun, 1989: 29-30).

These arguments mark the advent of a shift away from the description of the Tiananmen protests as an organised ‘democracy movement’ with elite connections. They emerge as part of a wider body of work that describes post-Tiananmen China as a technocratic ‘post-political’ society and takes ‘alienation’ to be the principal cause of the events of 1989 whilst explaining the enduring hold of the CCP through a dissolution of values. This new conceptual framing that gains in momentum throughout the 1990s has a new subject as its focus: gone is a rights-bearing subject and in its place emerges a postmodern subject.

It may initially seem that to speak of a dissolution of values marks a pronounced departure from the notion of the ‘end of history’ detailed above, but as will become increasingly apparent, in doing so much of the same conceptual apparatus is deployed, and similar results are produced. A particularly apt illustration of this is to be found in Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community* (1993), which whilst positing a form of community that is premised upon the breakdown of old identities, pitted against a reactionary central-state-apparatus, ends-up producing a meta-identity – a global protest subjectivity. Agamben’s account is especially interesting because of the manner in which it has clearly been influenced by Badiou’s philosophy and because of the approach to thinking the binding or unbinding of politics that Agamben advances.

First published in 1993, the same year as Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, Agamben's widely cited book can in many ways be seen as a contemporary to that of Fukuyama. The central problematic uniting both is the end of the Cold War, and the effect that the end of the antagonism between two superpower ideological blocs, capitalist and communist, will have on identity in the post-Cold War world. In place of Fukuyama's 'post-historical' world Agamben provides us with a postmodern world. Whereas Fukuyama posits the triumph of Enlightenment universalism with its rights-bearing subject, Agamben argues such sureties have been replaced by an essential 'unbinding' of identities (Agamben, 1993, Fukuyama, 1993).

The results are not dissimilar however, and Agamben's 'unbinding' effectuates a universal post-historical telos; crucially, he uses Tiananmen as his example par excellence to demonstrate his point. What is most striking about Tiananmen for Agamben is the lack of 'determinate' demands amongst the protestors. This, he argues, might make the violent reaction of the state appear especially disproportionate – what, we might argue, did the CCP have to fear when the protesters couldn't even agree on what they wanted in place of its rule? However, for Agamben, the reaction of the state becomes an inevitability when Tiananmen is considered through his theory of a 'whatever singularity' (Agamben, 1993: 84-85 & 86).

The 'whatever singularity' represents an attempt to ontologise towards a global postmodern subjectivity – through it difference becomes the governing condition of belonging, and community no longer needs to be predicated on identity politics. For Agamben, only a 'planetary petty bourgeoisie' now exists, and community is made possible through the breakdown of values produced by contemporary capitalism

(Agamben, 1993: 62 & 64). This is an identity that just ‘is’ on account of its very being, and in that being possesses a unity. Tiananmen, in Agamben’s analytic demonstrates how this community without identity asserts itself in an essential conflict with the state, which seeks to prohibit the ‘unbinding’ that is the essential condition of ‘whatever singularities’. Agamben describes this as a conflict between the state and ‘non-State (humanity)’, and he argues that: “Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear” (Agamben, 1993: 84-85 & 86).

Agamben argues that the state, for Badiou, is premised upon its ability to prevent an ‘unbinding’ through the assertion of an identity of some form or another and that this is what gives it such a diverse and enduring hold on politics. Echoing Badiou’s depiction of radical politics in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Agamben argues that the antithesis of the state form in the contemporary world is the formation of “community without asserting an identity” (Agamben, 1993: 85). Instead of emphasising the function of generic truth however, Agamben argues that self-belonging is the formative condition of whatever singularities – what he terms as “being-in-language” or “pure dwelling in language” (Agamben, 1993: 74). This, he notes is not akin to nomination in Badiou’s philosophy, but, instead it refers to the pre-eminence of ‘the idea’ – “the idea of a thing is the thing *itself*” (Agamben, 1993: 75). As opposed to a relational form of indexing or a governing encyclopaedia in which the distribution of names is an effect of an ordering logic that leads to taxonomical classification, in Agamben’s analytic shared naming is the effect of prior ontological distinction – the name is necessary and hence affirms a truth (Agamben, 1993: 74-76).

Agamben then arguably takes Badiou's negative characterisation of language in democratic materialism (as noted in Chapter Two) to its ultimate extreme suturing language onto an ontology of multiplicity (a correspondence theory of truth?). However, within Agamben's analysis there is no space for difference to assert itself in any manner other than as a collective opposition to the state, grounding it as a 'community'. This community grounded in an un-grounding that asserts its identity against the state is situated in relation to what Agamben terms the 'totality of possibilities' in an 'empty and indeterminate totality' (Agamben, 1993: 66, 84-85 & 86). It is important to be clear why this does not ultimately involve a genuine multiplicity. Firstly, as opposed to fidelity to the truth of multiple being, there is instead an intensification of that which is 'indeterminable' (Agamben, 1993: 66). This means that Agamben's 'coming community' is not one that is grounded in a plurality of differences, but in a general mode of being-as-difference, which is undefined. Secondly, it is key that we do define what is contained within this being-as-difference, because the effect of Agamben's argument is to overlook the many sectional interests that were present in 1989: students, workers, rich, poor, urban, rural, male, female, etc. The divisions between urban workers and intellectuals discussed in Chapters 3 and 5 is afforded no space by Agamben – nor for example, the gender dynamics excellently described by Lee Feigon (Feigon, 1994) – there is little possibility for difference that genuinely asserts itself as difference, with diverse understandings of what community is to be desired. Instead, Agamben makes the protests in the Square the leitmotif for a globalised protest that has little regard for sectional differences and diverse causes, but rather asserts his new universal postmodern identity politics in a common opposition to state power. Whilst Agamben seemingly provides a useful framework for thinking about the challenge to state power in the contemporary era, there is a strong case to be made then that he ultimately absolutizes the void of late-capitalist order.

In situating the protesters within a global trend in which the violent outcome of Tiananmen was inevitable, Agamben's arguments depart from the earlier discussion of a fractious CCP and PLA elite in which the outcome of Tiananmen was seen as the victory of a 'hard-line' faction. Agamben is far from alone however, and his arguments are emblematic of a much wider conceptual change. Perry Link has subsequently adopted a similar position to Agamben's 'unbinding' in explaining the post-Tiananmen maintenance of CCP rule. In his submission to the 'Hearing Before the Congressional Executive Commission on China', on the twentieth anniversary of Tiananmen in 2009, Link notes that since Tiananmen the CCP's message to the Chinese public has been "economics, yes, politics, no", and that by 'politics', "we need to understand broadly, ideals, political ideals, religious ideals". This he adds, has led to a 'values vacuum', in which only nationalism and the pursuit of wealth are acceptable in Chinese society, but the historically-rooted desire of the Chinese populace for shared ethical values still finds an expression in popular entertainment.<sup>13</sup> Link does not go so far as to diverge from his characterisations of Tiananmen as a democracy movement and he argues that "the fundamental nature of the regime has not changed," but he crucially locates Tiananmen as being a seminal moment in the transformation of Chinese society (Link, 2009: 11-13). This is a trend that is extended elsewhere throughout analyses of Chinese society from top to bottom, designating it as a post-political space. Whilst Link is unwilling to follow this logic to its natural conclusion and locate deeper roots for the changes within post-Tiananmen Chinese society prior to the event, instead of seeing it merely through the lens of the reactionary suppression of a democracy movement, other thinkers are. The effects of this move are to re-characterise the causes of the event, to

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<sup>13</sup> Link's arguments echo those of Xiaoying Wang who argues that there has been a collapse of the 'moral order' in modern China. Cf. XIAOYING, W. 2002. The Post-Communist Personality: The Spectre of China's Capitalist Market Reforms. *The China Journal*, 47, 1-17.

assign the protester a new subjectivity, and to make possible a re-characterisation of the modes of protest undertaken in the Square. In this sense, we see the conceptual enclosure of what is unique within the event, i.e. the epistemic dissonance that it causes, back within a hegemonic order.

The conceptual origins for these arguments lie in the ways that political economists have theorised alienation in Chinese society, with two principle strands of argument. The first begins by locating the causes of Tiananmen in alienation that resulted from state-socialism. For, Yanqi Tong, it was a dissatisfaction with the perceived economic failures of the CCP during the 1980s that produced a generalised apathy and a ‘soft exit’ from the authority of the Chinese state in lieu of an ability to flee. The mass alienation of which he speaks is defined in much the same way as Link’s ‘values vacuum’: “...mass alienation... refers to the citizenry’s disassociation from and rejection of meanings, norms, and values that define the environment in which they live” (Yanqi, 1995: 216 & 218). The obverse side of this argument, locates the causes of pre-Tiananmen alienation in market economics, but produces similar results. It is an argument that has been expounded by thinkers of the Chinese radical left, and developed by Western academics to account for the continued rule of the CCP, and the failure of democratic opposition, post-Tiananmen. There is a wide body of work here noting that the reform process in China during the 1980s produced a new kind of alienation due to the dislocation of urban and rural life, with the beginnings of the mass-movement of farm workers to the cities, changes in farming patterns and practices (contrary to common perceptions there is evidence to suggest that the process of market reforms was initiated in agriculture and not the coastal Special Economic Zones [SEZs]), as well as the advent of the assault on SOEs and mass-welfarism – frequently described as the ‘iron rice bowl’. It has been subsequently argued that the CCP unleashed

the forces of the market after Tiananmen, dismantling much of what remained of the iron rice bowl, fostering an individualism corrosive of established identities and forms of opposition, whilst ensuring its own legitimacy as the facilitator of market-led growth (Fewsmith, 2001, Hughes, 1998, Li, 1996).

This is a discussion which I shall return to in the following chapter in relation to worker resistance, but it is important to emphasise the extent to which the language of ‘postmodernity’ and ‘technocracy’ has overtaken academic discourse in both China and the West. In a 2011 biography of Deng Xiaoping, Ezra Vogel (2011) emphasises how Deng eulogised science above politics, and made technological modernity the measure of success, whilst countless others have argued that China today most resembles a form of ‘technocratic’ society, coupled with business/Party-led patronage networks (Andreas, 2009, Centeno, 1993, Shambaugh, 2001). For Joseph Fewsmith this has been reflected in Chinese academia, with criticism of the CCP moving away from an ‘enlightenment project’ during the 1980s, towards ‘postmodern ideas’, which have provided a critique of Western societies and thus questioned the efficacy of following the ‘Western route’ (Fewsmith, 2001: 112 & 113-114). Likewise, Ben Xu adds that it is the rejection of revolution as a means of bringing about modernisation that marks the most important change in Chinese academic circles (Xu, 1999).

Rong Cai adds that socialist alienation and the economic ‘opening’ of the 1980s produced a new discourse on the subject in Chinese academic circles and literature; ‘the model subject’ here was a ‘politicized human being’ (Rong, 2004: 10 & 19). For Rong this framing of the subject was rightly quickly condemned to the history books, and he is not alone in describing it as ‘naive’ humanism on the part of Chinese writers, insufficiently

aware of or unwilling to engage with the de-centring of the Cartesian subject in contemporary (European) ‘continental’ philosophy (Rong, 2004: 18, Zhang, 1992). This discourse failed, Rong adds, because it could not ‘claim agency’ in the manner that commercial modernisation enabled in Chinese popular culture. The cause of the failure was rooted in the departure from a radical progressive telos – luddite workerist thematics that embodied a failure to react to the modernising project, and excessive glorification of the 1919 May Fourth Movement – divorcing time from “its potency and evolutionary potentiality”. A corollary of this process was the disenfranchisement of the politicised Chinese intellectual, and by the 1990s discussion of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘enlightenment’ had “all but died out”. The political foreclosure embodied in Tiananmen combined with the appeals of post-Mao economic opportunities signalled the demise of visions of an Enlightenment subjectivity in Chinese society (Rong, 2004: 1-2, 6 & 21-22).

If we take such accounts at their word, then the possibility of resistance and change seems remote indeed. Hanchao Lu, for example, has argued that possibilities for resistance and/or alternative imaginings embodied in ‘nostalgia’ for the past in China have been circumscribed through their co-option by the state towards commercial ends – that the use of politically ‘neutral’ language allows the state to co-opt previously negative characterisations of bourgeois political spaces under Maoism as markers of cultural and economic ‘vibrancy’ (Hanchao, 2002: 171-172, 173, 175, 177-178 & 179-180). It is therefore important to account for how Tiananmen has been reconceptualised within the framework of ‘postmodernity’ and the ‘post-political’, in order to better pinpoint what this might tell us about fidelity and change.



#### 4.5. A Performative ‘Détournement’

In the opening lines of an edited collection on contemporary Chinese governance and society Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang, quote the Chinese novelist Yu Hua: “If you want to talk about modern China it’s not only about the money. During the Cultural Revolution there was no stage for the individual, just the government. Now there is a stage for everyone and you can see a show every day” (Aihwa and Li, 2008: 1). This is emblematic of a proliferation of thespian metaphors describing a ‘stage’, a ‘set’ and ‘actors’, as well as acts of bodily defiance in contemporary English-language academic discussion of China. This is not an incidental lexicon: it is made possible by a wider conceptual lineage that emphasises the mechanisms through which power is reproduced by its own symbolic display, along with the ‘performative’ character of statist identity politics and subjectivities of resistance.<sup>14</sup> In turn it relates to how we think about spatial hierarchies, communicative mechanisms, and the binding or unbinding of politics discussed above.

This framing becomes important in renderings of the Tiananmen protests and subsequent developments in Chinese society because of the form of subjectivity it presupposes. The novelist Yu is describing a “self-animating, self-staging subject in the post-Tiananmen era”, in the words of Aihwa and Li; however, they qualify this by adding that “the political unleashing of self-interest also constrains the fullest expression of private thought and behaviour” (Aihwa and Li, 2008: 1). Any ‘unbinding’ that might take place in Chinese politics has therefore been co-opted by the state in this description. Here, protest becomes

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<sup>14</sup> This is a widely cited theoretical architecture that first emerges in the writings of the Situationist International, and appears in novel ways through such diverse thinkers as Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Cf. KERSHAW, B. 1999. *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, London, Routledge.

a ‘spectacle’ and something of a petitionary gesture, appealing to be heard within the matrix of power within which it is locked (Debord, 1970).

Sheldon Lu argues that a “sense of deep cultural crisis” has followed Tiananmen in Chinese society with a change from “modernity to postmodernity”. Developments in China during the 1990s related to “transformations of the global cultural economy”, and as the state assumed the mantle of facilitator of the market there was a profound effect on academic and cultural practices in the country. One result of this change that he describes has been “hegemonic uses” of popular music and literature to transmit statist cultural memes, but also the emergence of new forms of ‘emancipatory’ parody that seek to subvert these very mechanisms (Lu, 1996:140-1 & 157).

In a later publication, Lu draws upon characterisations of ‘biopower’ in Foucault, Hardt and Negri, and Agamben, situating ‘Chinese [post]modernity’ within a ‘global biopolitical order’. In this analytic globalization has an ‘affective’ character, as it leaves its imprint on the psycho-social systems constitutive of Chinese cultural life, at the root of which lies the exploitation for production of digitised biological life. This is the ultimate rendering of a post-political order in which life ‘as code’ – the attempt to secure against the contingency of being – becomes the generative principle underpinning the maintenance of sovereign power, and resistance to that power operates in the same proscribed space seeking to disrupt and reconstitute its regulative flows. It is striking how closely many of the literary and cinematic interventions in post-Tiananmen China described by Lu resemble the situationist notion of the ‘détournement’ – immanent subversions of cultural memes that exploit tensions between the universalising bent of ‘footloose’ capital and established parochialisms. For example, Lu cites Hong Kong films dealing with themes of ‘identity

and diaspora,' noting how they responded to Tiananmen and the handover process, the former disrupting the latter, and provoking sentiments of 'alienation' amongst Hong Kong Chinese. Hong Kong cinema in this sense comes to best embody immanent processes of postmodern parody and reflection. Whilst Hong Kong has benefited economically post-handover and the memory of Tiananmen has dimmed, these films continue to express the ambiguities at the heart of Chinese identity formation looking at the "fluid process that happens at the level of the individual", as opposed to the portrayal of China as a rigid 'geopolitical entity' in mainland and Hollywood films. When this analysis is combined with Lu's verdict that the Chinese 'political intellectual' has been 'silenced' post-Tiananmen, it provides an insight into how portrayals of resistance and critical reflection in what is assumed to be a post-political space function within a wider framing of the legacy of Tiananmen and the enduring power of the CCP (Lu, 2007: 2-3, 51 & 124-125).

Whilst in this analysis Tiananmen is the point at which the transition from the 'modern' to the 'postmodern' occurs such a mode of explanation has also been used to re-conceptualise Tiananmen itself. In such an analytic it was not the failure of Tiananmen that triggered the change, or that signalled the end of an old failed model of politics, but instead, the change was already embodied within Tiananmen. Here, the forms of parody and subversion described by Lu are attributed to the protests in the Square in 1989.

Linda Hershkowitz, for example, has noted that the act of protesters occupying Tiananmen Square constituted a *détournement*, in that it attempted to vitiate established spatial hierarchies and transform them "into an embodiment of their political agenda". Hershkowitz draws upon the example of the Goddess of Democracy statue to describe the usurpation of the 'symbolic geography' of the Square. The statue, "her face turned

provocatively toward Mao's portrait over Tiananmen..." represented "...a direct challenge to the state's monopoly over the iconography of the Square. But it was at the same time an act carried out within an established spatial tradition of protest and dissidence also embodied in the political geography of Tiananmen Square". Whilst connecting the protests of 1989 to other historical protest events in the Square, Hershkowitz also highlights analogies that can be drawn between Tiananmen and the Paris Commune, connecting it to a legacy of European counter-cultural events (Hershkowitz, 1993: 395, 398, & 399-400).

Hershkowitz is far from alone however in making such a connection. In a similar manner, Baz Kershaw argues that the Goddess statue "participates in post-modern aesthetics to add a newly radical inflection to the performance of protest", and that "it reflects a growing internationalisation and globalisation of protest". He adds, crucially, that "the discourse of the Goddess is international", satirising socialist sculptural forms, with a 'clearly designed' cross-cultural mass-media appeal, playing off the imagery of the Statue of Liberty, whilst advocating a Chinese particularism through the gendering of the statue – '*unity*' above 'pluralism' in Chinese political culture. The performative strategies embodied in the Goddess statue are then linked into a 'late twentieth-century' lineage of 'celebratory and carnivalesque' (Western) political protest: "Bread and Puppet Theatre effigies used in American anti-Vietnam war demonstrations of the 1960s"; "Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp"; and "the queer rights demonstrations of Gay Pride". Kershaw is keen throughout his analysis to foster a sense of global subjectivity and he argues that through processes of globalisation, protest may begin to transcend cultural differences and make resistance a 'universal possibility', a trend that has been "forged by the 1960s counter-culture". Further, he makes explicit his intellectual debt to Debord and Baudrillard, whilst drawing on notions of a state-non-state dichotomy and alienation: "my account mostly

took as read the common explanation that the uprisings of 1989 were the result of a chasm between the people and the State” (Kershaw, 1999: 92-93, 109, 114, 117, 119 & 120-121).

Elsewhere, a comparison with the Woodstock music festival emerges repeatedly in the literature, for example, Orville Schell notes that: “The atmosphere... recalled Woodstock in its nonviolence and sense of giddy liberation, and the Paris Commune in the conviction amongst the demonstrators that the ‘people’ had finally risen up...” (MacFarquhar, 1989, Schell, 1989). Likewise, a quote from Philip Cunningham’s 2010 book *Tiananmen Moon*, excellently captures the emplotment of the Tiananmen protester within a globalised protest aesthetic:

“Standing behind the English-speaking [hunger] striker towards the back of the bus was a pretty woman with long hair wearing an airy cotton dress. She clutched a Coke bottle in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other. She looked like someone who had gotten on the bus to Woodstock and ended up at Tiananmen by mistake” (Cunningham, 2010: 155).

This framing of globalised postmodern protest also draws upon specific readings of Chinese history to support its arguments, and to explain what is unique to Tiananmen. There is thus an important theme of ‘continuity’ at the heart of the understandings of the ‘change’ that was embodied in Tiananmen as well. Kevin Latham, for example, advances this in the frame of the ‘post-political’ noting that revolution in Chinese popular media is not political, but ‘commercial’, whilst pervasive ‘cynicism’ remains of the continuation of Party media dominance post-Tiananmen, this cynicism has become so widespread as to have rendered revolutionary politics irrelevant, and therefore the pursuit of wealth in an

atomised society eliminates any other concerns (Latham, 2010). There are then two logics that combine here: the historical legacy of one-party rule, with its exploitation of mechanisms of mass communication, and alienation under globalisation.

For Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom conversely, the failure of the performative strategies used by the Tiananmen protesters is to be located in alienation stemming from the legacy of socialist rule alongside entrenched cultural practices. Whereas alienation under state socialism in Europe resulted in protests that produced democratic states using similar performative strategies – ‘street theater’ as Esherick and Wasserstrom term it – the absence of ‘civil society’ structures due to CCP rule in China prevented a unified political programme for change. More controversially they also blame the rural poor: “China’s large peasant population remained largely preoccupied with its own immediate material interests”. This position becomes somewhat more understandable, if certainly not justifiable, when their wider rendering of Tiananmen performativity is accounted for (Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1994: 36, 57 & 58-59).

For Esherick and Wasserstrom this ‘performativity’ does not take the form of a generalised modality of expression – performing protest subjectivities – in a manner that might extend the concept to include rural poor, but instead, it emerges out of a longer legacy of Chinese protest, and specifically “student-led mass movements that have taken place since 1919”. This in short is an elite discourse, it is practiced by the urban educated and it is concerned with state power. Esherick and Wasserstrom note that whilst there were two audiences for the symbolism of the protests: the general populace and the government, the value of the former was ‘largely instrumental’. This was a form of petitionary protest in which the students sought to be “taken seriously by the authorities as participants in the political

decision-making process”. Like, Latham, we see that in Esherick and Wasserstrom’s analysis the two principle factors are mass communication and alienation. The mechanism through which the deployment of culturally affective symbolism by the protesters was able to engage with state power power was television: before a domestic and then a global audience (Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1994: 36, 39 & 55).

Hershkowitz criticises Esherick and Wasserstrom for focusing too much on the ‘skilful manipulation’ of symbolism for political theatre whilst largely ignoring the ‘stage’ – meaning the spatial dynamics of the Square itself – but the ‘stage’ in Esherick and Wasserstrom’s text is the medium of television itself (Hershkowitz, 1993: 400). As such, Esherick and Wasserstrom note that symbolic participation within an established political hierarchy was central to the behavior of the students: they deliberately fostered the notion that they were patriotic defenders of the nation, and they acknowledged the legitimacy of the government and sought inclusion in the decision-making process. In controlling “Beijing’s symbolic centre, Tiananmen Square” the students were able to engage in a form of ‘political theater’ that connected to the long lineage of protest discussed above. This involved hunger strikes, up-staging Party commemorations, welcoming foreign leaders, staging (and up-staging) public meetings, and the erection of the ‘Goddess of Democracy’ statue between the portrait of Mao and the Monument to the People’s Heroes in the Square (Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1990: 840-841 & 856-857). This was, in short, a mode of communication that operated through established cultural memes and the hierarchies that they were intimately connected to.

#### 4.6. 'Tank Man'

The issue of whether resistance presupposes a binding or unbinding of politics is not unique to the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Žižek, for example, in discussing rioting in the Parisian suburbs from marginalised young members of migrant communities has noted that a kind of necessary violence can be defended in which a solution is not offered, but instead a problem is purposefully created. Speaking of the rioting youth, he says: "Had they organised a non-violent march, all they would have got was a small note on the bottom of the [newspaper] page..." (Žižek, 2008: 77). Rather, he argues that there was a requirement for a 'new universal framework' in which minorities were fully recognised, and so brute violence against the old order of French identity politics was essentially legitimate (Žižek, 2008: 77-78). There are though problems in thinking the relationship between universalism and subversion or destruction in such a manner, beyond the obvious ethical questions concerning violence.

Within the Enlightenment/rights narrative of Tiananmen discussed earlier in the chapter a universal framework was undoubtedly deployed, although the extent of its novelty is open to question. The end of history thesis made revolt against communist rule a part of the expansion and triumph of the liberal-democratic capitalist world. In that framing the students were clearly articulating 'timeless' and universal demands as was apparent in the description of the Goddess of Democracy statue in American government. In the case of the postmodern interpretive framework, as I have shown, overarching referents and a certain kind of universalism are still present, through which a common counter-culture is advanced.



Following Žižek's example, in the case of the postmodern accounts that emphasise immanent subversion, there is an evident desire to cause a problem for the state, but it is so within the context of a desire for inclusion. However, might an act of bodily defiance such as the Tank Man incident signal a more pronounced destructive impulse or is it again the case that universals appear and act as a break on political novelty?

William Sun compares the Tank Man to the self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc during the Vietnam War, and if we consider it in those terms as a sacrificial act, then it seems that an act of individual resistance can send the ultimate signal of defiance to the state (Sun, 1997). In *Ethics*, in discussing the agency that is involved in a truth-procedure, Badiou argues that it is possible for the individual, or at least an individual act, to become 'immortal' through its incorporation in a truth-procedure (Badiou, 2001: 44). He notes the example of a "militant who manages, at the end of a complicated meeting, to find simple words to express the hitherto elusive statement which, everyone agrees, declares what must be pursued in the situation" (Badiou, 2001: 45). Is it then the case that the Tank Man has a similar function, that this is the ultimate act of fidelity, one that perfectly conveys the meaning of Tiananmen, namely, the resistant individual pitted against the state?

The most well-known photograph of the incident (Figure 1) in which an individual halts the progress of a column of People's Liberation Army tanks, and which appeared on newspaper front pages around the world, and has been reproduced on an immense scale in the intervening years was taken by Jeff Widener of the Associated Press:



Figure 1. (Independent, 1989a).

The reporting of the Tank Man incident shortly after it took place by an ABC News reporter speaks of the banality of the event however, stripping it of much of the sense of drama and defiance that Widener's image, reproduced without context, intimates. The reporter calmly discusses how a man blocked a column of tanks heading away from the Square for a few minutes, before they continued on (Judd and Serafin, 1989, Serafin and Shepard, 1989). That description tallies with a series of wide-angle photographs from Stuart Franklin (Figure 2), which emerged later and provide a very different perspective:



Figure 2. (Franklin, 1989).

The image above is important because it indicates the hidden face of Tiananmen, which I shall discuss in the following chapter in greater depth. Franklin's image displays the aftermath of the intense violence between workers and ordinary Beijing residents – *not students* – and the PLA which took place in Beijing on the night of the 4<sup>th</sup> and early hours of the 5<sup>th</sup> – *but not in Tiananmen Square itself*. The image also displays the enormous scale of the military response – an entire army group was brought into the city to suppress a rebellion. As the tanks leave Tiananmen Square after the event the power of the state is very much evident. However, rather than demonstrating an essential state-non-state opposition or a kind of symbolic gesture politics, Franklin's photograph speaks to a much more complex reality. The fate of the Tank Man, his identity and motivations have never been conclusively settled, despite sensationalist claims in a number of books and articles and that ambiguity has no doubt sustained the Tank Man as an image of resistance.

Franklin's image shows us very clearly the immense power of the state. The enduring power of the state of the situation – both the institutional state, and the socio-economic order it guards – is the central problematic which all of the accounts of Tiananmen that I have discussed in this chapter have struggled to come to terms with. All of the symbols and accounts that I have discussed in this chapter however, from the figure of the pro-democracy student activist and the Tank Man, to the Goddess statue and the young subversives, have been problematic precisely because they have entailed a universalism that displaces novelty with an overbearing focus on an established order, or universal referents. As such, they concede too much to the state of the situation. It seems then that we need something more than a subtractive violence that aims at a new inclusive order or a political binding. As such, I therefore argue in the next chapter that it is a focus on a direct subjective encounter, which can ultimately bring an appreciation of a novel political present back into our analysis, without subordinating it to the state. This allows us to bring a degree of political agency back into renderings of resistance, whilst also being mindful of wider structure and struggles, instead of focusing on the impossibility or undesirability of radical subjective change.

## 5. The Evental Encounter: Anti-State Politics within the State

### 5.1. Introduction

In the previous two chapters I showed the problems associated with nomination and its potential enclosure within the state of the situation. I also drew-out problems pertaining to immanence and rupture in this regard. When a politics of rupture is mobilised by the state, as in the case of the Cultural Revolution, or when notions of immanent subversion remain tied to the ‘encyclopaedia’ of the state of the situation and a hegemonic order of ‘communication’, then we must consider the problems associated with escaping overarching structures of language/rhetoric, and the world that they sustain.

Badiou’s answer to this problem in *Ethics* and *Logics of Worlds* (2009a) is to move away from ‘naming’ and towards a phenomenology of the evental ‘encounter’. As Wright has noted, this is not a total shift in that we still have to consider the function of different forms of fidelity, the subjective statements that help to fix the implications of the event, and obstacles to them (Wright, 2013). These issues encourage investigation of the precise mechanisms of the evental encounter. In this chapter I therefore discuss how the direct encounter with oppression and exclusion at the hands of students, intellectuals and the party-state in 1989 led workers towards a new mode of praxis that exploits the interstices of state power. Following Wright (2013), I do not take the encounter to be entirely divorced from issues of nomination, and therefore the pro-active ‘counter-nomination’ of the state is the framework against which to judge the effectiveness of what I take to be a novel mode of grass-roots worker activism and resistance. As such, I detail the obstacles to the state’s powers of counter-nomination that are embodied in the devolution of central party control to regional authorities, and the ad-hoc and de-centralised nature of strikes, sit-

ins and blockades by workers, alongside the power of the Chinese state's internal security apparatus post-Tiananmen. I conclude that the central lesson involves the ability of the workers to maintain a mode of anti-state politics within the state on account of its localised nature. Generic worker subjectivity is thus predicated on a form of anti-state politics that depends upon an ongoing conflict with the constituent parts of the state on a localised scale. This encourages us to reconsider the function of the singular revolutionary event and what fidelity means in the contemporary era.

## **5.2. Anti-State Politics**

Previously, I noted that Badiou sees one of the central questions that arises from the Cultural Revolution as being: "what gives unity to a politics, if it is not directly guaranteed by the formal unity of the state? (Badiou, 2005: 484)" I noted that whilst I share Badiou's sentiment that this is an important issue in the case of the Cultural Revolution, that ultimately I could not support his assertion that even in failure the Cultural Revolution provides an affirmative example of novel anti-state politics. The examples that Badiou gives to support his case, I noted, all ultimately involved the maintenance and reassertion of state power: Maoist rule mobilised political ferment within the state towards the maintenance of state power under a Maoist banner and not its dissolution as claimed by Badiou; Maoist ideology was an integral part of that process, including the 'Sixteen Points', which was not 'innovative' as Badiou claims, but instead has explicit calls within its text for the maintenance of strict central party control; Mao's cult of personality did not function as a 'flag' for the Red Guards as Badiou claims, but as a deferential force that reinforced statist control and organised politics 'from below' on Mao's terms; further, that apparently 'grass-roots' politics was itself explicitly mobilised towards the maintenance of state power. I also showed in that chapter how the memory of the Cultural Revolution was

used within China during the 1980s to support a culture of political dissent amongst students and intellectuals that was deferential towards state power.

Likewise, in Chapter Four, I described the role that designations of a post-political settlement of politics can play in foreclosing the possibility of an anti-state politics. The assumption that there is not a space for politics outside of the hegemonic framework of a reactionary surveillance state and capitalist consumer culture serves to encourage forms of protest that concede too much to the state of the situation, its encyclopaedia of accepted referents, and the dominant communicative mechanisms and spatial hierarchies through which it is maintained.

Both accounts, in Chapters Three and Four, might appear to indicate a kind of impasse of the political: that even if the ‘formal’ unity of the state appears weak, that the state of the situation still maintains many more subtle and pernicious means at its disposal for reinforcing both the power of the institutional state, and the wider ideology that it embodies. Finding the conditions through which political novelty and change may take place therefore seems to be incredibly difficult. However, as I argued in Chapter Four, I also find an overbearing focus on the impossibility or undesirability of a revolutionary politics to be disquieting, and ultimately inconsistent with maintaining the *possibility* of meaningful political change. This is a position that Badiou himself has consistently articulated across his work, even if his fidelity to ‘revolution’ has at times led him in some unpalatable directions, such as in the case of the Cultural Revolution, wherein his dismissal of an immense weight of historical evidence in support of some quite tenuous conclusions omits some important lessons, principle amongst which is that a form of reactionary fidelity driven by deference to charismatic individuals and fierce invectives is liable to

reintroduce state power. The Cultural Revolution should not be the only historical case to teach us this. In positing a kind of ‘with us or against us’ binary between depictions of revolutionary ‘terror’ and an at times, blind fidelity, verging on dogmatism, it seems that Badiou has not done himself any favours.

There are though ample resources within Badiou’s work, especially his more recent texts, principally *Ethics* and *Logics of Worlds*, for identifying the means through which fidelity need not be tied to the state of the situation and can potentially effect meaningful change. In *Manifesto for Philosophy* Badiou writes that “every truth is post-evental” (Badiou, 1989: 89). Arguing against Žižek, Bosteels makes the case that such sentiment is demonstrative that the truth of the event is not something that we ‘chance upon’, that it is in fact “actively produced” and sustained by “a step-by-step intervention, after an event” (Bosteels, 2002: 197). Whilst I would not disagree entirely with Bosteels’ position – in Chapter Two I argued against a preminent focus on the ‘miraculous’ event and ‘grace-like’ fidelity to it – I do not take it to be wholly representative of either Badiou’s philosophy, nor indeed of the means through which the truth of the event is encountered and sustained. In many ways Bosteels’ reading speaks to a conflation of truth with a kind of discursive/ideological position. Badiou’s work has on the contrary been marked by an unapologetic conflation of truth, subject and event. It is correct to say that if we push such linkages too far we can verge on a kind of circularity wherein it becomes difficult to locate origins in anything other than a miraculous occurrence without apparent cause (Marchart, 2007: 124). However, there is another alternative that Badiou has himself pursued, and that is to think of the truth of the event as a novel mode of *political being*, as opposed to a rhetorical position to which one self-consciously and publicly asserts their fidelity.



Badiou has in fact given different routes towards such reasoning across his work. In *Being and Event* and the article *The Event as Trans-Being* nomination is understood to refer to an essence of the event that cannot be articulated in the terms of the encyclopaedia of the state. The name gives form to something that was previously *unsayable* and as a result for naming to take place there must be the intervention of an element of radical contingency – what happens to individuals in order for them to become subjects (Badiou, 2004a, Badiou, 2007a). Indeed, as I noted in Chapter Two, Badiou argues in *Being and Event* that a subject need not be self-aware in the sense that Bosteels describes. Whilst *Logics of Worlds* moves away from the preeminent focus on nomination, Badiou does not abandon the attempt to elucidate a logic of appearance and subjective constitution that is not sustained by a purely subjective decision – the counterpart position having frequently been attributed to Badiou, i.e. that he is a voluntarist. In fact, *Logics of Worlds* extends this logic of appearance in a greater amount of depth, a move that Badiou argues was necessary to undermine readings of the miraculous event, dependent upon the ‘sovereign’ naming of the subject (Badiou, 2009a: 361, Bensaïd, 2004: 97).

Thus, in *Logics of Worlds* Badiou shifts focus from what is ‘thinkable’ in a world to what is ‘logical’ within it. He can then more readily account for contingency through what he terms a ‘disjoined’ logic of appearing or ‘inappearance’. To repeat Badiou’s own example, the unexpected arrival of a noisy motorcycle in an idyllic country scene is not consistent with that world, they share little in common, but it is not entirely alien and abstracted from it. The surprise of the appearance of the motorcycle – what makes that appearance possible – is dependent upon a more generalised ‘common’ that links them, but is not itself readily identifiable (Badiou, 2009a: 126): “no part common to the being-there of the two beings is itself there. The conjunction inappears: the two beings are disjoined”. As Badiou notes, the

closer the correlation or the strength of the ‘common’ that links the two elements “the more the conjunction of the two beings is there in the world” (Badiou, 2009a: 127). This is an important point to stress, for Badiou is essentially arguing that contingency is measurable against the logic of a world, or to use his previous vocabulary, that some occurrences will be more radically uncoupled within the state of the situation than others. It is not then that Badiou is arguing that some contingent occurrences are miraculous or otherworldly, but that they are at the far margins of what might be reasonably expected, given a prevailing ordering logic.

Such occurrences cannot be readily anticipated, instead they are ‘encountered’ – a term that is introduced in *Ethics*, as I noted in Chapter Two. In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou shows how the encounter is not merely a passive process, but instead that it involves an ongoing reordering of one’s being. As such, he gives the example of thwarted and forbidden love, which brings an ongoing encounter with dangerous desire. Each subsequent romantic encounter re-inscribes the power of the initial act, but it does so through the apparent impossibility of the love (“love is born of loss”), which has cascading regulatory effects that “might decisively change the course of the world and of the subjects who inhabit it”. Such an encounter necessitates a somewhat binary and partisan decision. True love in this case is experienced as a deviation from norms and expectations, and it involves placing the subject outside of those rules to find a new sense of placement (Badiou, 2009a: 367-368). It is not then the case that the decision precedes experience, but that an encounter forces a choice – one can be faithful and follow its consequences, or one can decide not to act upon an initial impulse.

Such a choice is what Badiou characterises in *Ethics* as an ‘ethic of the real’ in which the encounter leads to a reorientation of one’s being towards a new truth:

“Confirmation of the point is provided by the concrete circumstances in which someone is seized by a fidelity: an amorous encounter, the sudden feeling that this poem was addressed to you, a scientific theory whose initially obscure beauty overwhelms you, or the active intelligence of a political space... (Badiou, 2001: 52)”

Fidelity involves ‘not-forgetting’, but doing so is not a question of memory, it is instead about keeping alive the evental encounter as the organising principle of one’s subjective being, in such a sense making a truth ‘generic’, making it ‘real’:

“Not-forgetting consists of thinking and practicing the arrangement of my multiple-being according to the immortal which it holds, and which the piercing through [*transpercement*] of an encounter has composed as subject” (Badiou, 2001: 52).

An ethic of the real therefore moves praxis from a fixation with nomination, and as a result ready threats of counter-nomination or occlusion, to the order of action: “the ethical maxim ‘Keep Going!’” (Badiou, 2001: 52). Now this is not to suggest that counter-nomination is not still a significant issue, but that if fidelity is not thought of as a kind of rhetorical act, that if it is more about what is actualised than what is said, then it is easier to think of the conditions through which it might be sustained. Nor is there an implication though that the encounter *necessitates* a certain kind of response, for different forms of fidelity can exist (Badiou, 2007a: 233-234, Badiou, 2009a: See Book I). However, the *effectiveness* of a

given truth-procedure and the subjective form that supports it will be judged by the half-life that it maintains.

In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou is quite explicit about the demands for a very material support for a truth, a position that he notes echoes his earlier arguments in *Theory of the Subject*: “That truths are required to appear bodily [*en-corps*] and to do so over again [*encore*]... (Badiou, 2009a: 46)” Subjectivated bodies as they feature in *Logics of Worlds* are taken by Bosteels to demonstrate the requirement for a truth-procedure to be carried by an organisational form or structure (Badiou, 2009b: xi). This is however an emphasis that is not wholly in keeping with the manner in which Badiou frames the relationship between the logical ordering of a world and the evental encounter in *Logics of Worlds*. Whilst I noted in Chapter Two that Badiou has argued that politics has a natural tendency to summon an institutional form (Badiou, 2004b), his work has also been driven by the attempt to locate political articulations that might fall outside of that form, and the arguments in *Logics of Worlds* continue to support that stance. In this sense, subject bodies constitute the material support of a truth through the event *subtracting from* an existing structural form – a negation out of which the trace of the event mobilises a new form (Badiou, 2009a: 462, 465 & 467):

“We can thus say that the elements of the body... are those whose identity with the becoming existent of the inexistent is measured by the intensity of their own existence... Since the inexistent which is made incandescent is the trace of the event, we have a limpid abstract formula: a post-evental body is constituted by all the elements of the site which invest the totality of their existence in their identity

to the trace of the event... Or, to employ a militant metaphor; the body is the set of everything that the trace of the event mobilizes” (Badiou, 2009a: 466-467).

To further elucidate this ‘limpid abstract formula’ we can note that Badiou’s account in *Logics of Worlds* is not altogether identical to that in *Theory of the Subject*, in which the political subject was equated with the communist party. Whilst Badiou notes that the effects of a body in “introducing a cut and a tension into the organization of places” remains the same as in the earlier text, in *Logics of Worlds* there is an appreciation of the requirement for *repetition* not present in *Theory of the Subject*, wherein negation was preeminent, as the communist party served as the vehicle of its own dissolution (Badiou, 2009a: 45-46). As such, “the efficacy of the subjective becoming of a body is reliant on the points of the world that it encounters” (Badiou, 2009a: 454), and the trace of that encounter with an established order remains immanent to a truth-procedure in mobilising and sustaining it. For practical purposes with regards the content of this chapter we can think of this as an ongoing conflict between the state and that which falls in the interstices of its ordering ‘count’. This is of course very different to implying that a novel political truth must necessarily summon an institutional structure of its own. It is though naturally possible for the goal of an anti-state politics to be the emergence of a new state, but as we have seen in Chapter Three, doing so can challenge the possibility of an anti-state politics, as similar logics of state power persist from one state form to another. In fact, the Chinese case is far from alone in attesting to the likelihood of this scenario. The Twentieth Century contains many examples of revolutionaries becoming autocrats. Returning though to our earlier impasse of the political, we do have to note that in the case of an actually-existing anti-state politics, the imperative appears to be that a necessary struggle binds state and anti-state here still within a binary logic of conflict.

This is not to suggest that as in the problematic renderings of protest discussed in Chapter Four, that Badiou is presenting a mode of praxis that necessarily deploys the same referents as the encyclopaedia of the state. Instead, he argues that we are dealing with a “synthetic operation in which the subject reveals itself as the contemporary of the eventual present, without necessarily incorporating itself into it” (Badiou, 2009a: 62). He further argues that it is because of the existence of revolution that there is a reaction and not the other way around (Badiou, 2009a: 62). That is though a harder position to support, one which implies a degree of consistency and continuity to a revolutionary politics which is often difficult to locate. We can note the importance of prescriptive political imaginaries, but we also have to note a form of periodisation that is dependent upon a logic of scission as Badiou himself noted in *Theory of the Subject*, i.e. that the development of the revolutionary communist political form in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries depended upon problematisation of what was *novel* in each situation, even if lessons were transposed from one event to another (Badiou, 2009b: 46-47).

Badiou argues in *Logics of Worlds* that a common revolutionary form is at stake through successive stages of ‘production’, ‘denial’ and ‘occultation’ (Badiou, 2009a: 63), but as we have seen in Chapter Three, attempts to present a singular revolutionary subject are themselves ultimately liable to delve into an obscurantism, as we lose sight of the precise mechanisms of co-option and counter-nomination by the state. Further, I noted in Chapter Four that the kind of state-non-state division discussed by Agamben promotes a problematic essentialisation of conflict that ignores the diverse nature of situations or worlds and subjective forms. As such, Badiou all too often presents the revolutionary ‘present’ in relation to a fixed referent in an established Marxist-Leninist-Maoist lineage of revolutionary politics.

As I also showed in Chapter Three, it is not though insignificant that such rhetorical framings take place, and Badiou is correct to note that they can be a mobilising force. The example he gives in *Logics of Worlds* is the description of Toussaint-Louverture as ‘the black Spartacus’ – a designation that, rhetorically at least, makes the Haitian revolutionaries of the late-Eighteenth/early-Nineteenth Century the heirs of an earlier tradition of rebellion against slavery (Badiou, 2009a: 64). This is what, as I noted in Chapter Two, Meillassoux refers to as the production by faithful subjects of “a retrospective genealogy of precursors” (Meillassoux, 2011: 3-4). However, I think it remains important for thinking about the conditions upon which an anti-state politics might be sustained that we emphasise the manner in which revolutionary memory functions in the negative sense, i.e. what is to be avoided, as much as the positive prescriptive sense in which an underlying tradition is reasserted – a ‘dialectics of necessity’ (Wright, 2013: 72). In this sense, the imperatives of the political present provide the interpretive grid for both political imaginaries and historical memory – making the eventual encounter the operative condition for fidelity and not a persistent subjectivity.

To summarise then, we can note that nomination has an ever-present function – one that often leads in problematic directions – and to the extent that it can be ‘redeemed’ it must bring with it a degree of critical self-awareness, so as to reconcile past failures and imagined futures alongside the imperatives of the present. There is also the important place of a subjective experience that might not always bring a self-conscious, discursive element – we can often be carried away by events, and unable to easily name and interpret them, but the unfolding of a contradiction is important enough in and of itself for political change. Then there is the fact that the eventual encounter itself is not so much an isolated eventual ‘flash’ but that it exists in a political present, introducing a productive dialectical

split within an established order ('state' and 'anti-state'), and that the repetitive and ongoing nature of the encounter is vital to the reproduction of a truth. Returning then to the impasse of the political we can provide something of a more affirmative response, namely that if the state of the situation maintains numerous and varied means for reasserting its power, that there are a broader array of means for keeping alive an anti-state politics, as difficult as that may be. Of course, however, such a theoretical framing requires some more precise investigation as I will endeavour to provide in the remainder of this chapter.

### **5.3. Workers in 1989**

At a meeting of the CCP elite (the Central Committee and State Council), held on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1989 to declare martial law in Beijing, the Premier Li Peng declared that:

“The arrival of PLA troops in the vicinity of Beijing is definitely not aimed at dealing with students. They have not come here to deal with the students. Their aim is to restore the normal order of production, of life, of work in Beijing Municipality” (Li, 1990a: 314).

The state named the criteria that mandated a seemingly very Schmittian exceptional response (Schmitt, 1985, Schmitt, 2007): troublemakers within the state, supported by external powers, were disrupting the economic life of the city and challenging the rule of the party. Particular vitriol was reserved for those who had sought to subvert a patriotic student movement, those who had called for worker organisation and mobilisation outside of the framework of the communist party, and those who challenged the legitimacy of CCP rule (Li, 1990a, Li, 1990b). Li was clear that it was not the student movement that was at fault:



“It must be stressed that even under such circumstances, we should still persist in protecting the patriotism of the students, make a clear distinction between them and the very, very few people who created the turmoil, and not penalize students for their radical words and actions in the student movement” (Li, 1990a: 312).

The actions of the CCP elite in 1989 can be understood in the context of a sustained debate in Chinese intellectual circles and the party leadership in the preceding months over the place of ‘neo-authoritarianism’ in safeguarding the process of economic reform. The use of such authoritarian measures as were seen in May and June 1989 was ultimately endorsed beforehand by many in the party hierarchy, including Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng – it was a rationale that had followed a significant degree of deliberation (Oksenberg et al., 1990, Petracca and Xiong, 1990, Sautman, 1992, Yun, 1990). In this sense, the concern with maintaining party control alongside social and economic stability was not so ‘exceptional’, although the rhetorical framing of a threat immanent to the state, but also drawing on external support, followed an all too familiar and decidedly Schmittian pattern, in which the ultimate recourse is to the prerogatives of sovereign state power (Neal, 2006, Schmitt, 1985, Schmitt, 2007). We obviously then have to understand the rhetoric of the party leadership in that context, namely, that whilst it might be convenient to ‘pin the blame’ on a cabal of powerful individuals, that we are dealing with a broader form of *raison d’État*, dependent upon a specific set of concerns, logics and rationales. It is within such a logic that the state’s powers of counter-nomination must be situated. Existing referents from the encyclopaedia of the state then become the means of characterising the problems at hand, shifting the focus to the ‘safe ground’ of the state, denying any expressions of novelty and otherness in thought or political being (Neal, 2006, Wright, 2013: 115).

To bring attention to social cleavages and the dislocation wrought by economic reform, splits between worker subjectivity and a governing ‘socialist’ party-state, would have been to acknowledge potentially ruinous contradictions in the legitimacy of state ideology and political order. Much of the focus of the state therefore falls upon allusions to secretive cabals and foreign agents, manipulating from ‘behind the curtain’, so to speak (Li, 1990b). The response of the state is therefore rendered ‘legitimate’, and there is not a contradiction between its suppression of dissent and its role as a socialist state (Wright, 2013: 115 & 132-133). In this sense it is important to bring attention to Deng’s infamous ‘Four Cardinal Principles’ declared in 1979, of upholding: “the socialist road”, “the dictatorship of the proletariat”, “the leadership of the Communist Party”, “Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought” (Deng, 1979). As long as these four principles were to be adhered to, then dissent and debate were to be acceptable – democratisation, free-market reforms, etc. could be discussed if they did not explicitly challenge the four principles. However, any argument or process that might highlight the incongruity between the four socialist principles and a developmental path in the 1980s that was veering in an ever more capitalist direction were fundamentally threatening: the students were patriotic and supported the reform process; worker organisation outside of the party was a threat to that process (Leung, 1998: 226).

In this sense, we can note that the counter-nomination of the state in 1989 relies upon a shifting of the terrain of discussion away from the principle contradictions of capital, a position that is ultimately helped by the kinds of accounts from afar discussed in Chapter Four. A demand for an acceleration and extension of an already underway reform process is not as threatening as a challenge to the status of the CCP as the guardian of ‘the socialist road’. This is a reflection of the CCPs enduring fear of what has been termed ‘the Polish

disease’, namely, that worker activism might become a rallying point for a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the party, as in the case of the Polish ‘Solidarity’ trade union during the 1980s (Cunningham and Wasserstrom, 2011: 14). Such a challenge has not materialised in the manner of Solidarity (Wasserstrom, 2009) – as an organised political body – but we can make a strong case that what begins in 1989 is highly significant for the emergence of a new form of grass-roots worker activism.

It is though significant to note that the *attempt* to form such an organisational structure beyond the strict auspices of the CCP in 1989 is still important in terms of the encounter with a certain kind of political novelty that it brought. This has also been a key feature of post-1989 labour activism, as radicalisation has followed the dismissal of petitionary demands (Ching Kwan, 2007: 239). As I noted in Chapter Three, in 1989 workers were castigated and forced to the margins of the protests by students and intellectuals. They were also subject to similar treatment from the CCP itself as they attempted to gain legal recognition for the self-declared Beijing Workers’ Autonomous Federation (‘WAF’ /‘gongzilian’) in Spring 1989 (Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 14, 15 & 17).

A group of workers had sought involvement in the protests from an early stage when they placed a commemorative wreath to Hu Yaobang in Tiananmen Square, and publicly discussed official corruption and mistreatment in the workplace (Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 2, Walder, 1996: 65-66). Hearing student rhetoric that denounced corruption they tried to increasingly involve themselves in the protest movement, only to face opposition from students, who as Andrew Walder and Gong Xiaoxia describe, sought to keep their own movement ‘pure’ (Walder, 1991: 484-485, Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 1-2, 7 & 14-15). The initial group of workers were not however deterred, finding support for their

position amongst other workers in the city. Walder and Gong note that in comparison with Solidarity, the Autonomous Federation might have appeared particularly weak, lacking a traditional union structure and recognition from officialdom. However, they add, its decentralised and informal composition came to be its strength, allowing them to grow in size following the imposition of martial law (Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 3).

The prevailing context ultimately served to force a certain kind of resistance for the workers through the foreclosure of alternatives, and the experience of this divergence from established modes of behaviour increasingly drew stark contrasts between their own aspirations and lived experiences at the time, and the prevailing order of politics. The alienation of workers from the party was vital, as was the contingency of events during a period in which fear, rumour and intense rivalries circulated. It was this that allowed the workers to gain an increasing sense of their own distinct political being, and their fierce resentment towards the established order was intensified.

Despite initially taking inspiration from the students, the workers themselves had long-standing political grievances, as discussed by many of the anonymous interviewees from Beijing and elsewhere in China involved in worker protest and direct action in 1989, in the compelling *A Moment of Truth* published by the Hong Kong Trade Union Education Centre and the Asia Monitor Resource Center in 1990. The rapid geographic spread outside of Beijing was facilitated by the shared grievances of workers. Beijing provided the inspiration and as one worker from Fujian noted: “we undertook political actions diametrically opposed to the government for the first time in forty years” (AMRC, 1990: 67). Another in Guangzhou added that: “Apart from the worker’s movement in Beijing, the Solidarnosc union in Poland inspired us a lot... we wondered whether we could borrow the

experience of Solidarnosc in Poland and set up an independent political force outside of the Communist Party” (AMRC, 1990: 79-80).

The Beijing Autonomous Federation actively denounced the political system from the beginning of their involvement, with rhetoric that railed against the privileges of Party officials and their families. This rhetoric only grew in its hostility over the following weeks and months, appealing to Marx, furiously denouncing the Party, political leaders and capitalist exploitation (Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 7-8). As such, one worker involved in the protests complained that:

“Originally, the workers were no better or worse off than the cadres, but now the cadres have more protection, in terms of welfare and medical treatment... corruption and malpractices are commonly found in society, and the status of the workers in the cities is lowest of all” (Unger, 1992: 183).

When martial law was declared on the 19th of May, as the students’ role increasingly faded, the angry rhetoric of the workers transitioned into direct conflict with the authorities on the streets. Military units were blockaded throughout the city and the federation called for a general strike as its membership swelled (Walder, 1996: 65-66, Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 9). Workers ultimately received much harsher treatment in the aftermath of the state’s violent intervention than students, with tough prison sentences and scant attention from Western media captivated by the story of student pro-democracy protest and high profile dissident human rights activists (Leung, 1998: 226-227, Li, 2008: xiii, Unger, 1992).

We can trace a lengthy process of alienation of workers from the CCP during the 1980s, as the constitutional right to strike was abolished in 1982, and the constitution was re-written to support private enterprises and their property rights, whilst bureaucrats enriched themselves in the process through a corrupt multi-layered pricing system (Au and Bai, 2010: 482-483, Meisner, 1996). By the end of the Cultural Revolution the wages of the urban workforce had fallen 20 percent in real terms compared to two decades earlier, housing space in the cities had shrunk dramatically and the housing that was available was in a terrible state of disrepair, with basic goods also being rationed, all leading to what Walder has described as an “‘us’ versus ‘them’” mentality of workers towards the Party (Walder, 1991: 468). Whilst statistics show that wages increased during the 1980s, workers were hit hard by inflation, which brought sharp rises in the cost of living (Walder, 1991: 470-471). Reforms of management structures in Chinese factories also served to weaken the Party’s control over the workforce during the 1980s. As SOEs transitioned towards the private sector, managers increasingly became less the representatives of the Party and enforcers of Party discipline, and more the representatives of private enterprises (Walder, 1991: 474). Walder has argued though that managers were generally supportive of the student protests in the Square during the Spring months of 1989, reflecting the broad sentiment of the workforce, even if the reasoning differed. The loyal Party cadres did not however share such sentiment and directives were issued from Beijing’s municipal authorities forbidding worker involvement in the protests – calls that were ignored as increasing numbers of workers sought to participate (in one case they were led out of the factory and up to the Square by their managers) (Walder, 1991: 485-486 & 487).

Despite this scission between workers and the CCP it is notable though that the workers still sought to gain official recognition from the Party for their federation in 1989.

Gongzilian ultimately sought to take over the representation of workers at the national level from the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), going so far as to hold elections and seek to form something approaching an organisational structure (Dongfang, 2005: 67-68, Walder, 1996: 67-68). One worker in Beijing noted that:

“The ACFTU cannot represent us workers. They are labour aristocrats sitting on the heads of the workers. So we organised ourselves spontaneously” (AMRC, 1990: 25).

Gongzilian were not the sum total of worker mobilisation during this period, and Walder has noted an immense proliferation of independent groups of workers, and as such he argues that:

“This profusion of independent organization among workers is remarkable more for its variety and vitality than its political effectiveness. All these organizations were quite small and loosely organized (Walder, 1996: 67).”

The same Beijing worker quoted above added that:

“I think that the WAF is an organization of the working masses. It does not want to be a political party” (AMRC, 1990: 26).

Whilst the attempt to organise centrally in an official capacity was ultimately thwarted, it was to be the ad-hoc and informal mode of politics that was an enduring success – an approach that was not the result of a pre-planned strategy, but instead was forced upon the

workers. The Federation ultimately came to develop a “loose and consensual structure”, one “without any formal offices designated for individuals” (Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 9). Contrasted with the students, the workers were especially wary of fostering links with factions or individuals within the Party who might seek to manipulate them for their own ends (Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 17). Much of the subsequent criticism of the actions of the workers in 1989 has ignored these rationales and focused on a perceived failure to sustain a centrally organised trade union movement. Instead what Ching Kwan Lee describes as “a cellular module targeting local officials and employers” has been its enduring legacy (Lee, 2010, p. 57). For Walder and Xiaoxia the approach of the workers represented:

“...a sharp departure from China’s recent traditions of political dissent because it reflected so well the political attitudes of ordinary Chinese working people – attitudes that have rarely been expressed in China’s elite-centred tradition of political dissent” (Walder and Xiaoxia, 1993: 17).

Whilst worker activism was not new in China, the 1989 protests in Beijing brought a radical change in its scale and orientation. Autonomous worker federations named in a similar manner to and inspired by the Beijing gongzilian were set up in sixteen major cities between April and June 1989. The organisations were though independent of one another and established spontaneously by workers in the various cities, without outside guidance. Despite a crackdown on the autonomous federations following the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, this mode of grass-roots worker activism, independent of influence from politicians and the intelligentsia has endured (Leung, 1998: 227). Further attempts to clamp down on worker organisation and mobilisation outside of the official ACFTU framework have followed in



the years since, but that organisation's complicity in the assault on workers' rights has left little respect for it amongst workers, who have frequently resisted management and the state of their own volition (Au and Bai, 2010, Chan, 1994: 4).

The China Labour Bulletin was able to report that by 2010 an estimated 30,000 strikes and related protests were taking place in China each year (CLB, 2012: 1). Depending upon the precise criteria for inclusion, the figure may rise even higher. A *New York Times* article from August 2005, for example, notes that the public security minister gave a figure of 74,000 "mass incidents, or demonstrations and riots, that occurred in 2004" (French, 2005: 4). Others have argued for a substantially higher figure – 120,000 or more annually (See: Kernen, 2009: 50). Increased international attention has been directed towards more recent labour protests as Chinese economic growth has slowed and a 'rust belt' has emerged in the industrial northwest, but protest has not been confined to one-region (Reuters, 2017). Citing the CLB, CNN reports that labour protests doubled between 2014 and 2015 – a trend that has continued through 2016 (Griffiths, 2016).

As such, Ching Kwan notes that:

"Despite the deadly crackdown on the Tiananmen movement, with workers receiving the heaviest sentences, strikes became an increasingly routine method of labor resistance" (Ching Kwan, 2010: 65).

It is this mode of grass-roots labour activism and its enduring nature alongside a powerful state security apparatus that I wish to examine further in the remainder of the chapter.

#### 5.4. Encountering Novelty

As we have seen throughout the thesis, Badiou's work is littered with examples of grand revolutionary episodes such as the Spartan Rebellion, the Haitian Revolt, the Paris Commune, the October Revolution of 1917 and the Cultural Revolution, and even if these sequences have in many senses been judged as failures, he has been interested in what is novel within them. A focus on the singular revolutionary 'event' can though at times be somewhat misleading and it is why the broader focus on periodisation and sequencing in his work is also important. As such, there is a place for considering change that is revolutionary but that does not bring a dramatic and immediate departure from one system of rule to another. Indeed, as I have argued previously in this chapter and the thesis, there is no guarantee that praxis will not bring an intensification of state power and the return of old logics of rule. What is truly novel politically may instead persist within and against an established order of politics. It is important to ask then what it is that 'tips the scales' so that a broader sequence of struggle and resistance might change in a substantive manner, and what allows it to resist subsumption beneath a broader web of structural entanglements that might rob it of its political novelty?

It is with these questions in mind that I intend to assess the endurance of grass-roots worker activism post-'89. A great deal has in fact been written on the subject of Chinese labour struggles during the past decades. The growth of the Chinese economy has brought closer attention from academics and journalists outside of China. Elizabeth Perry has argued that these protests are "economically driven" and thus not 'political' in the sense of student pro-democracy protests, and that because of their de-centralised and localised nature the CCP has been willing to allow them (Perry, 2001: 166-167 & 168). Likewise, Fei Yan has made similar claims that the protests are 'economic', or driven by grievances

such as abuses of power and corruption from local officials, as well as mistreatment at the hands of the police, and that they are therefore not a threat to the authorities because they do not display pro-democracy banners or have a central organisation (Fei, 2013). I find these readings to be at odds with an immense weight of scholarship detailing the grievances of workers and the difficulties that it causes both the central government and local authorities. This division naturally cuts to the heart of deeper lying assumptions about the nature of ‘politics’ – whether we conflate the term with a parliamentary or representational model, or whether we understand the constitution of politics to happen more widely in the economy and society. It also brings us back to the discussion of a hegemonic order of communication from the previous chapter and ultimately the key contrast between petitionary protest that operates on the terms of the state of the situation, and a politics of rupture that makes surprise its operative condition.

There is much evidence to show that Chinese worker protests have been highly politicised, with class-based rhetoric railing against the corruption and privileges of the Party and wealthy Chinese. Protesters have not just sought short-term redress in the workplace, but have articulated demands for changes in economic policy and political leadership (See, for example: Au and Bai, 2010, Gilbert, 2005, Hassard et al., 2001, Kernen, 2009, Philion, 2011, Weil, 2006). Whilst protesters have been denied a platform by official Chinese media, and internet censorship is widespread, they have still found means of communicating with one-another and disseminating their complaints through new media and technologies (Kernen, 2009: 55, Xing, 2012). Whilst protests have often been limited geographically, they have demonstrated an ability to disseminate their messages more widely in society and take protest beyond the workplace, disrupting the functions of local government and the economy through strikes, blockades and sit-ins. As Ching Kwan notes:

“Labor protests in the post-Tiananmen decade have witnessed a heightened tendency for workers to go beyond the confines of their workplace. Bringing their protests into the public arena, they are often joined by other disgruntled segments of the local community. Labor activism thus not only underlines the erosion of state power at the grass-roots level, and a shift from the enterprise to the state as their target of challenge, it also has the potential to become a rallying point for community-based activism” (Ching Kwan, 2010: 67).

Spontaneous grass-roots activism has been especially well-suited to challenging the exploitation that is happening daily on a regional basis, and from which central government has sought to distance itself. The CCPs economic strategy since 1989 has involved the devolution of fiscal controls and welfare responsibilities to regional authorities, and a rapid deregulation with all of its attendant consequences for labour rights. This process has encouraged corruption and exploitation through the increased power given to local officials who stand to benefit personally (Ching Kwan, 2010: 75).

The attack on the ‘iron rice bowl’ of state-owned enterprises and welfare provisions for their workers has further eroded the few centrally organised structures through which workers could find security. Instead, they have been increasingly placed at the mercy of factory owners and regional Party officials, with limited prospects for redress through the legal system (Ching Kwan, 2010: 75, Fewsmith, 2001: 112 & 113-114, Hughes, 2002, Hughes, 1998, Li, 2008, Li, 2011, Li, 1996, Unger and Chan, 1995: 47). As such, Eli Friedman notes that the CCP is caught in an ‘insurgency trap’ in which its economic policies encourage activism, but it is unwilling to allow independent union activity, whilst the official ACFTU has proven ineffective in its response (Friedman, 2014).

Protests, post-1989, have not been isolated from one-another. Whilst the suicides and protests at the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen in 2010 have received the most international attention outside of China, there have been much larger outbreaks of protest that have escaped the confines of individual factories or regions and have spread across China. In 2002 mass-protests in Liaoyang spread to more than twenty factories (Ching Kwan, 2007: 239). Likewise, in 2010 a labour protest at the Honda factory in Foshan in the South of China spread quickly to other factories in neighbouring regions, encompassing foreign-owned, government-owned and privately-owned factories (Yang, 2015: 28). The protests in more recent years (2014 onwards), as noted above, have been on an even larger scale (Liu and Shi, 2016). As James Griffiths has reported for CNN, this is remarkable given the domestic and international news-media blackout that typically surrounds individual protest events – it is only usually after-the-fact that we learn of them via dissident networks (Griffiths, 2016, See also: Liu and Shi, 2016).

One of the reasons for the recent acceleration of protest is the explosion of social media, which has enabled the growing use of the internet in organising activism and enabling direct action, as well as raising public awareness, domestically and internationally (Thornton, 2008). As Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun note: “The numerous street protests in recent years often spill over into cyberspace, provoking debate and protest online” (Yang and Calhoun, 2008: 10). They further add that: “...compared with conventional social networks based on primary and secondary groups, online communities involve more indirect, mediated, and long-distance relations. The ties are thinner but are much broader and thus are particularly conducive to low-cost and speedy coalition-building and mobilization” (Yang and Calhoun, 2008: 11).

Whilst the scale of worker activism is not in doubt, how might we judge its effectiveness, and what can it tell us about the notion of ‘fidelity’? In terms of effectiveness there is a great deal of evidence to show that workers have been persistent in the face of often violent suppression, in many cases extracting concessions from their employers and the state (Au and Bai, 2010, Friedman, 2014, Kernen, 2009). Harsh responses have frequently only served to intensify the protests and as a result there has been a reticence from the central government to intervene, often shifting the blame to regional officials (Kernen, 2009, Perry, 2001). Whilst we have not seen the emergence of a centralised movement, it is highly likely that such an organisation would be suppressed and its leadership imprisoned – the state’s brutal suppression of the Falun Gong sect provides a particularly strong example in that regard (cf. Ching, 2001, Madsen, 2000, Zhao, 2003). The decentralised and ad hoc nature of the protests as a result keeps the authorities ‘on their toes’ so to speak, and provides a duration and momentum to the protests that otherwise would be extremely difficult to sustain. That activism and protests are taking place on an ad-hoc and localised level with such intensity and shared grievances also speaks to a common ‘class consciousness’ – one that defies the kinds of arguments covered in the previous chapter, with claims that such markers of identity as ‘class’ are no longer relevant.

Identity politics is an important means through which the state has been able to reassert a degree of influence however. Nationalism has provided a means of co-opting or disarming worker protests, with foreign-owned factories a frequent target (Cunningham and Wasserstrom, 2011: 15). Likewise, during the post-Tiananmen period, an enormous influx of migrant workers from rural regions of China and outlying provinces has brought divisions between workers to the fore, which employers and the government have exploited (Au and Bai, 2010, Cunningham and Wasserstrom, 2011, Min, 2015: 5, Weil,

2006). Despite these problems Weil has detailed how efforts have been made by workers – both natives of the cities and migrants from rural regions – to cooperate more closely with one-another, and as such he gives the example of workers in Zhengzhou from different sectors coordinating their actions. He correctly notes however that problems of divisions amongst workers have been a perennial feature of labour activism, and that China is no different in that regard (Weil, 2006).

For Chris King-Chi Chan and Pun Ngai, the “proletarianization” of Chinese migrant workers is central to the remaking of the Chinese workforce. The workhouse-like conditions of shared dormitories and other living spaces has enhanced a shared identity and co-operation amongst migrant workers. Kinship networks have been easily translated into collective action when workers’ interests have been threatened, and the dorm setting has accelerated consensus-building and organisation amongst workers. Despite some divisions amongst workers, they argue that this new form of community organisation holds enormous potential for mobilisation and militancy (Chan and Pun, 2009: 292).

Chan and Pun further add that China’s status as the world’s factory means that anti-foreign capital campaigns owe as much, if not more, to the socialist left as the nationalist right (Chan and Pun, 2009: 287 & 302). This is though a much more vexed issue, which relates to broader conceptions of Chinese political culture and the extent to which they shape dissidence, collective action and wider societal aspirations. Such characterisations can be problematic when they reduce politics to cultural stereotypes. In the Chinese case the principle argument is that vague conceptions of representation, participation and legitimacy are sustained by a paternalistic Confucian social order that emphasises social

stability above a “procedural conception of democracy” supported by (Western-style) representative institutions (Shi and Lu, 2010: 125).

There is certainly evidence of co-option and side-lining of protest movements through what essentially amounts to an authoritarian discourse in certain cases in China. In her interviews with workers in Liaoning, and particularly amongst older workers, Ching Kwan Lee found that many viewed the central government as more “just and righteous” than local officials (Ching Kwan, 2007: 236). However, as in the case of the 1989 Workers’ Autonomous Federation in Beijing, an initial petitionary impulse which is dismissed and followed by radicalisation has often been decisive in the development of labour struggles in China. As Ching Kwan has also noted, the scale of this petitionary activity has been staggering (she cites the State Letters and Visits Bureau figures which show a 260 percent increase between 1995 and 2000), indicating a civic and political engagement that goes beyond narrow economic self-interest and which frequently results in direct action, undermining the notion that some kind of deferential ethic has a hold on the Chinese workforce (Ching Kwan, 2007: 230-231). She adds that:

“Workers’ targets are usually local power-holders, because they are the only remaining access points in what is popularly perceived as an agentless and self-regulating market economy” (Ching Kwan, 2007: 238).

Due to the manner in which CCP rule has changed in the post-Tiananmen era, rather than representing a negation of politics, localised struggles cut to the core of the battle for the control and legitimacy of the party-state. As David Goodman has noted:



“...70 per cent of government expenditure is now the responsibility of local government: a high proportion for a decentralized or federalist liberal democracy let alone a centralized Party-state” (Goodman, 2014: 73).

Corruption and nepotism within the CCP and the emergence of new economic elites since the 1980s present the biggest challenge to the legitimacy of the Party. The blurring of boundaries between public and private sectors and ownership means that distinctions between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ protest cannot be easily maintained (Goodman, 2014: 74). Whilst restrictions have prevented senior CCP members from open profiteering, the same conditions have not been extended to close family members of the Party elite, with vast fortunes typically hidden from the public. The same cannot be said of the rest of China’s mega-rich, for whom ostentatious displays of wealth are the norm (Goodman, 2014: 75-76). When we take into account the contrasts between the majority of Chinese blue-collar workers and the elite, and the blurring of boundaries between public and private ownership it is not surprising that petitionary demands have rapidly transitioned into direct action.

The economic restructuring of SOEs in the 1990s led to enormous unemployment, with unemployed workers frequently listed as “laid off temporarily” to ‘massage’ the statistics (Goodman, 2014: 132). The CCP has consistently failed to deal with the problem of high unemployment, with a new wave of mass lay-offs in the Northeast rust belt, and whilst surveillance of workers and NGOs has increased, so has the scale and pace of worker activism (Griffiths, 2016, Kang Lim et al., 2016, Reuters, 2017).

For Feng Chen, the sense of class consciousness that is apparent in worker activism is undeniable, as are the leftist sentiments of the workforce. Discussing a factory occupation in 2001 he notes that:

“The workers justified their occupation of the factory as defending public property to which they had legitimate rights. This form of action can be traced back to the tradition of working-class struggle in the final years of the Chinese Revolution. As some workers proudly described it, their action of defending the factory was similar to that of their predecessors on the eve of the communist takeover in 1949, when pro-communist workers formed “worker guard teams” (gongren jiuchadui) to protect factories from sabotage by the Guomindang... Ironically, however, workers are now using the same method to ward off capitalistic takeovers endorsed by a party-state that still labels itself socialist. In doing so, workers draw a clear line between “them” and “us” and create a situation of “collective bargaining by blockade” to force management or government agencies to reconsider any restructuring schemes that are to their disadvantage” (Chen, 2003: 250).

Further, for Feng:

“...the labor protests in question are... spontaneous “contentious gatherings” that occur in a context where public debate, consensus mobilization, and media framing are lacking. Therefore, the rhetorical legacy of the past – the old socialist conception of public property – becomes one major resource used by discontented workers...” (Chen, 2003: 240)

Giovanni Arrighi has given much attention to the immense potential retained on the radical left in China, as have the likes of Weil, Li and Samir Amin (Amin, 2014, Amin, 2005, Li, 2008, Weil, 2006). They all see within the immense scale of Chinese labour activism the potential for seismic political change with global repercussions. I think it is not enough though to suggest that this is merely the result of a stronger tradition of worker activism in China as Amin has claimed (Amin, 2005), and that instead we are seeing something novel with regards to how Chinese labour has freed itself from the shackles of the CCP. We can ask whether the goal of achieving state power that characterised left wing politics throughout the Twentieth Century has been abandoned in favour of a gradual movement from below as Amin intimates (Amin, 2014). The conditions have certainly changed, especially when the ‘Communist Party’ becomes the facilitator of a rampant exploitative capitalism, for example. It is too soon to suggest that ‘structures’ are being put in place through Chinese labour activism – the issue is more the sense of class consciousness that is being reproduced and extended through the encounter with an alternate political real. That we have seen a sustained and increasing level of worker activism since 1989 would seem to resist the notion that it was the triumphal event of market liberalisation, and that China since has come to resemble a post-political society.

Crucial to this new life that has been given to labour politics in China has been the mode of protest itself, which rather than coming secondary to a political programme has instead been the driving force. In its use of space this resistance has been spontaneous, not giving authorities forewarning, diverse in drawing in a broad range of popular support, and possessing of a directness in its willingness to suspend the operation of factories, perform blockades, and stage sit-ins. In performing a direct physical disruption, deploying barricades, and through the withdrawal of labour, this resistance is not dependent upon

conventional mass media and established communicative mechanisms to transmit a message. Instead, it is the mode of protest undertaken by those who do not have a voice, and actively impose their own political rupture without seeking permission from the holders of power. By suturing themselves into the interstices of state power and the complex arterial flows that comprise the everyday functioning of the economy, protesters and activists have been able to continuously assert their power, despite the reactionary powers of the state – the national expenditure on internal security has grown annually to the point that the full figures have been withheld, most likely due to the embarrassment it would cause the CCP (Martina, 2014). Grass-roots activism means that there are not unions that can be ‘broken’ by the state, giving this resistance a duration that has not been seen in the West for many decades.

We can conclude therefore by saying that whilst the initial encounter with a new mode of politics in 1989 has undoubtedly been important, it has been the ongoing encounter with the mode of praxis it was exemplary of, which has been most significant. In this sense, we have seen a fidelity to a particular form of activism and protest, one that has been remarkably impervious to state power. As such, it is worth reflecting on comments by Jean-Luc Nancy on the ‘surprise of the event’. He argues that it is not desirable to possess meaning, but instead to be meaning in a world vacated by divine assurances (Nancy, 2000: 4). Affirmation of a truth depends upon repetition. It is not about determining facts in a positivist sense, but instead this repetition has a relational quality in which being becomes aware of its own distinctiveness through the contrast with other contingent and transitive forms (a repeated evental encounter) (Nancy, 2000: 6). In this regard, naming and the formation of all regimes of truth follow an inherent logic of identification through which they assert a particularity: their being-as-difference. As such, contingency and the

circulation of meanings are intimately linked. It is the experience of otherness in thought - not just as the figure of a singular human other – that which is not anticipated and surprises, which forces thought to think its own being (Nancy, 2000: 172 & 174-175). In contrast, therefore, to a focus on a singular revolutionary event and fidelity to some form of ideological position – such as the canon of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought – it seems important to state that it is a novel mode of political being that is ultimately at stake in imagining the conditions for a politics that evades the state of the situation and its encyclopaedia. In this sense fidelity is very much dependent upon an ongoing encounter with its own conditions of genesis, as opposed to representing a kind of revolutionary memory.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Introduction

I began this thesis by asking what the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests can tell us about Badiou's philosophy of fidelity and its relationship to change. I noted that the concept of fidelity has an important function in Badiou's wider philosophical system because it provokes questions about how immanence, rupture and conflict enable change.

Change is taken by Badiou to be synonymous with the appearance of a novel truth supported by a subjective form through an act of fidelity to the event – a truth-procedure. Much of his work is therefore premised on the attempt to understand how such change is made possible in the context of an established structural order or governing logic. As such, thinking the appearance and place of the 'new' necessitates thinking the function of the 'old'. We are thus encouraged to ask whether novelty brings an abrupt rupture – if it necessitates the dramatic restructuring of a world? Further, what are the conditions under which such a restructuring might be meaningful, does the old persist within the new, do the two coexist, is such a coexistence necessary to animate the unique being of a novel form in a world, or a signal that the new is not so new?

In asking these questions we must enquire as to the precise function of fidelity in history. However, as I noted in the introduction to the thesis, Badiou often dialectically opposes the historical and ahistorical, and uses historical allegory to support arguments grounded in mathematics and philosophy. This necessarily complicates investigation, as we always have to be mindful of the ahistorical referents that Badiou is using to interpret and challenge accounts of historical events.

Badiou's approach to reading history is driven by his personal political concerns. His many decades of involvement in leftwing politics in France underscore his philosophical arguments and historical analysis. That analysis is therefore inherently polemical and I have shown in the thesis that it can lead his thought in problematic directions.

There is a tension between Badiou's fidelity to a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist lineage of thought, or what I noted in Chapter Two he terms as a 'politics of emancipation', and the logics of historical change that emerge from his work.

The principle conclusion that I will detail in this chapter, therefore, is that there is a division in how fidelity functions in Badiou's work, leading in two directions. The first is what I shall term as a 'militant ethic'. It privileges a rhetorical understanding of a truth-procedure, sharp rupture or 'destruction' and ahistorical 'generic' truth that has a universal character. I argue in the text below that Chapters Three and Four in this thesis challenge the efficacy of thinking about fidelity in such a manner. The second approach is, I argue, supported by my reading, in Chapter Five, of the fidelity of Chinese factory workers to a novel mode of grass-roots worker resistance, one that begins with worker activism during the Tiananmen protests. This approach takes fidelity to be a novel mode of political being premised upon an ongoing encounter with its conditions of genesis. It emphasises change within a world, 'subtraction' as opposed to destruction, immanent movements as well as broader and more interrelated sequences of conflict within history.

I argue that whilst within Badiou's work there are resources to support both the militant ethic and the encounter, that the eventual encounter is ultimately less problematic in allowing us to theorise the appearance and maintenance of meaningful political change.

In the final section of this chapter however, I address attempts to reconcile these two approaches according to the continuing place of Maoist dialectics within Badiou's work, and reflect on the enduring relevance of Badiou's work for understanding contemporary protests and activism. I argue that attempts to link Badiou's work in a kind of dialectical synthesis are ultimately hampered by Badiou's own political commitments, which lead to sharp dichotomies as opposed to dialectical movements, principle amongst which is the 'either/or' reading of universalism and difference in the contemporary political environment. This, I argue, demonstrates a starkly ahistorical tendency, and that we cannot have our dialectical materialist cake and eat it when reading Badiou: either we abandon overarching, universal political referents in favour of the dialectic, or we abandon the dialectic in favour of them.

## **6.2. Fidelity as Militancy**

In Chapter Three I showed that the historical reality of Chinese Maoism poses a number of challenges to Badiou's work. In abstracting Maoism from the manner in which it unfolded as a logic of institutionalised conflict and ferment within the Chinese state, many of the lessons that it can present to the left are lost.

Badiou has had an aversion towards discussing the violence and terror that might surround a revolutionary period in a negative light, because he believes that above all we must preserve the possibility of a new form of politics taking place. If we are to focus on the violence, he argues, then a pessimistic form of politics takes over, an acceptance of the status quo and a belief that revolution is undesirable, that the categories of 'truth' and 'the subject' are complicit in killing and oppression, the position that Badiou attributes to postmodern thought (Badiou, 2005, 2009a). Being faithful to moments of revolutionary



action instead gives us the potential to keep alive the possibility of genuine novelty by juxtaposing a radical truth with established knowledge, so that we might force a change from old to new, an approach that, as Bosteels notes, Badiou finds in Maoist ‘investigation’ (2005). An investigation of the particularities of Chinese communist rule can contribute much however to an understanding of how such investigation might itself be operationalised, and it is to Badiou’s discredit that he does not do so effectively.

A preeminent focus on nomination – or what following Russo we might terms as ‘the declaratory essence of politics’ (Russo, 2006) – has the effect in Badiou’s work of making the Red Guard in the early years of the Cultural Revolution a privileged agent of revolutionary change. Hence, many of the complexities and contradictions that surrounded their actions during the early years of the Cultural Revolution have been elided. This romanticisation of revolutionary action has frequently plagued left wing politics, and to borrow Badiou’s own terminology, ultimately has something of an ‘obscurantist’ function (Badiou, 2001, 2009a).

By taking political pronouncements and rhetorical positions at ‘face value’ Badiou ignores the fact that the very anti-state politics which he seeks to exalt was in fact deeply implicated in the preservation of state power, and that not only did it support the institutional state, but it also operated within a hegemonic order of knowledge and communication that was inherently antithetical to the kind of politics that he argues is present during the early years of the Cultural Revolution.

Demagoguery at the level of the mass line and deference to the charismatic individuals or elites that instigate it, often by appeals to legitimate grievances, is a recurring feature in the

history of actually-existing communism. Badiou does discuss it, but Mao and a bureaucratic cabal are apportioned the blame, and the Red Guards largely escape criticism. As a result, Badiou does not adequately reflect on the manner in which forces and struggles that are immanent to the state are at the heart of the political sequence of which the Cultural Revolution is a part. The manner in which the state of the situation can mobilise contradictions and a politics of rupture in the service of state power is ultimately a vital lesson.

One of the issues here may be that as Pluth and Hallward have both noted, that Badiou's treatment of politics as an isolated domain distinct from the economic, material 'base' of society is not helpful (Hallward, 2003: 284, Pluth, 2010: 174). In this regard, the careful elucidation of the relationship between material and ideational ('superstructural') conditions can only help a process of investigation. Crucially, it allows us to think about the means through which pacification, co-option and 'counter-nomination' function.

The Red Guards are representative of a reactionary mode of politics. As such, the ideological reasoning that underpins the advent of the Cultural Revolution is not just corrupted by Mao's pursuit of power, but also by the fundamentals of the governing form of Maoist state ideology. Whilst Badiou sees novelty and a break in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, the reality is that it is an intensification of the state of the situation. The actions of the Red Guards demonstrate the realisation of a reactionary Maoist ideology, one that instrumentalises a supposedly anti-bureaucratic and anti-state impulse towards the furtherment of Mao's own personal power and a Maoist ideological programme within the framework of the party-state. This mode of politics is then

instrumental in making the post-Cultural Revolution political order possible – Chinese technocratic capitalism is born in Maoism.

Therefore, when Badiou abstracts a romanticised caricature of Maoism from the reality of Maoism as a logic of rule in China he unfortunately elides some of the important lessons of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution:

- That when we eulogise resistance on account of its basic act of resistance without regard for the complexities that surround it, or when we treat the revolutionary as a kind of persistent sociological category we can lose sight of both the emergence of genuine novelty, and the manner in which revolutionary action is complicit in the maintenance of state power.
- That we must consider the manner in which different revolutionary imaginaries and prescriptive political programmes unfold within the framework of the party state, the manner in which they interact with different political constituencies and how they then might be able to escape that hegemonic ideological and institutional context.
- That if we make the state of the situation the leitmotif for a model of anti-state politics by adopting an ideology that is deeply imbricated in state power and divorcing it from its context, then without regard for the very real material context that it comes from, our usage of it can only be idealist/rhetorical and cannot easily suture itself back within that material context so as to effect a dialectical scission and produce a change from old to new.

These problems are not though unique to Badiou's reading of the Cultural Revolution and they reflect a broader current within his work. As such, in Chapter Two I was critical of Daniel Bensaïd's reading of a 'miraculous event', and argued, following Bosteels, that we can locate some important dialectical relationships in *Being and Event*, as well as different subjective forms and modes of encountering the event that challenge the conflation of nomination with a strictly rhetorical act (Badiou, 2001, 2009a, Bensaïd, 2004, Bosteels, 2004). I also noted though, that there is much in *Being and Event* that lends itself towards such a reading, a point that Badiou himself concedes in *Logics of Worlds*.

*Being and Event* is not alone in this regard. In *Ethics* and *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003) there is a comparable conflation of fidelity with an act of grace-like fealty towards a particular interpretation of the event. A stark 'with us or against us' binary is present in *Ethics*, with that which negates the truth of the event characterised as 'evil' (Badiou, 2001). As I have noted on a number of occasions in the thesis, Bosteels is correct to point out that this truth is Badiou's truth and not the truth of the other (Bosteels, 2011: 178). In this sense, the correct 'ethics' of the event becomes a kind of violent rhetorical act that can only negate other forms.

This focus on a destructive forcing is also present in *Theory of the Subject*. Within that text, the subject was conflated with the communist party by Badiou and destruction was emphasised, with a change from one order of politics to another. The communist party was understood in relation to a specific historical-materialist lineage. Despite an emphasis on rupture and scission, successive communist insurrections were still understood as stages in the development of revolutionary politics of which Maoism was to be the final development. It was Maoism that signaled the break with the party form. Organised

communism was thus reflexively to mutate into another insurrectionary mode of politics. Materialism and idealism were dialectically entwined. Idealism was always concomitant with a necessarily violent materialism. Communism sought a re-placement beyond the ‘bourgeois world’ through a necessary antagonism (Badiou, 2009b).

Whilst a scissional logic of change was emphasised in *Theory of the Subject* it was problematic in so far as it co-existed alongside universal and ahistorical referents that might supersede the mobilisation of difference and contradiction on which that account was based. Within the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist lineage destruction was always concomitant to a form of reconstitution that followed in an established tradition. Periodisation was therefore more sequential than dialectical. Badiou argued that the ‘black sheep’ of dialectical materialism was the only force able to recognise the properly dialectical relationship between idealism and materialism, but actually-existing dialectical materialism mobilised both ideational and material forces in the maintenance of state power, as I showed in Chapter Three (Badiou, 2009b).

These issues associated with nomination and Marxist-Leninist-Maoist forms of periodisation connect to the notion of ‘generic truth’ in Badiou’s work (Badiou, 2007a, 2009a). The deployment of universal referents from the left is a serious issue that relates to whether we understand the emergence of novelty to be an explosion of difference or the assertion of some manner of universalism (Bosteels, 2014).

In *Ethics* Badiou argues that differences are rendered insignificant by the event. He declares that differences “hold no interest for thought”. They relate to the banal everyday ‘self-evident’ multiplicity of humanity, and as a result connect to the status quo. They are

then in his mind the natural terrain of the state of the situation, which can deploy such differences to foreclose the possibility of a generic, universal truth that might displace the established order (Badiou, 2001: 26-27).

There is though a fundamental problem in relating Badiou's work to the study of political dissidence and resistance here. If emphasising difference negates meaningful change then what effects does universalism have in comparison? In Chapter Four I showed the problems within readings of the event – Tiananmen – based upon a kind of generic subjectivity – whether a rights-bearing Enlightenment or postmodern subjectivity is presupposed. I demonstrated that sweeping accounts of protest denied the important contradictions and cleavages that were at stake in the Tiananmen protests: between students and workers, between workers and the state, between revolution and reform. By ignoring these issues we ignore what is truly novel within the protests. This operation also extends to actively foreclosing the possibility of change by presenting a post-political world in which the very existence of these important political differences is denied.

As I noted in Chapter Three, Badiou responds to the problem of untruthful truths in *Ethics* by retreating into a kind of hierarchy of events. Some events are 'simulacral', they simulate an event, and instead of naming the void of a situation they summon its 'plenitude'. In this sense National Socialism captures the names 'revolution' and 'socialism' in the service of a form of fidelity that is seen as an 'obligation' to the race and nation (Badiou, 2001: 72-73 & 74). Therefore, Badiou can account for the rhetorical deployment of a kind of partial truth as a universal, generic truth. There is though a strong case here for saying that this explanation is insufficient in that it does not adequately address the obscurantist function of truths that have a universalising character, that his

notion of ‘generic’ truth is itself problematic and that it threatens to reintroduce “the power of the One” (Badiou, 2006: 61).

If a truth-procedure depends upon the subtraction of a universal from a necessarily multiple world, must that universal itself not depend upon a logic of difference? To cite one of Badiou’s own examples from *Ethics*: “Marx is an event for political thought because he designates, under the name ‘proletariat’, the central void of early bourgeois societies” (Badiou, 2001: 69). There might be two ways of thinking through this case: in the first, Marxism mobilises a difference – a distinct proletarian identity – one that is contrasted against the prevailing bourgeois capitalist order and that provides the antagonism through which the novel political being of the proletariat can emerge and fulminate against; in the second, there is the fidelity to that form through the ‘Internationals’, the assertion of a ‘scientific Marxism’, the Stalinist development of Marxism as a reactionary logic of state power. The second follows from the first in political thought, but it essentialises the void with quite disastrous effects. As soon as the difference negates difference it becomes a force that hierarchically orders: the revolutionary movement of the late-Nineteenth-early-Twentieth Century becomes the reactionary party-state of the 1970s or 1980s. If fidelity is towards a universal, prescriptive form of truth, does it not then inherently violate that which makes an event an event? Is a truth procedure not always necessarily split from within, i.e. its birth in multiple being, and being-as-difference undermines its ‘generic’ status?

Generic truth implies a finality that is alien to the broader and more nuanced understanding of historical change that I have argued in the thesis is present in *Logics of Worlds*, and whilst thinking the place and function of regimes of truth that assert themselves as

universals is important, such universals should not be made a measure of the good, or used to define the appearance of new subjective forms. It seems that if we limit ourselves to praising forms of subjectivity that tend towards the messianic and millenarian, that we are then liable to blind ourselves to the forms that are best placed to resist modes of statist and dogmatic ordering. The account given within *Logic of Worlds* is important because it shows the function of the event and fidelity within a hostile world as carriers of difference, an important point for when we consider the possibility of change within the contemporary global order.

Suffice to say though; such an interpretation is not un-controversial. In *The Actuality of Communism* (2014) Bosteels has expertly discussed the debates surrounding the place of thinking of being on the left. He notes that following Marx, Badiou has celebrated the destructive power of capitalism – “its properly *ontological* virtue” in the words of the latter. As Bosteels rightly notes though, if we emphasise how the destructive zeal of capitalism displays a void at the heart of politics, that all is fleeting above ‘random multiplicity’, then are many leftist ontologies today not also complicit in the status quo (Bosteels, 2014: 61-62)? This is ultimately Badiou’s target in *Logics of Worlds* when he attacks the celebration of difference in democratic materialism and in *Ethics* wherein he criticises Levinasian ethics. If we discuss the subject as a marker of difference do we not ourselves negate the ‘cutting’ function of generic truth, its ability to operate as a destructive force within a world, bringing a meaningful change from old to new?

Ultimately, I find the ‘either-or’ dichotomy between difference and universalism to be abstracted from the conduct of politics. As I noted in Chapter Two, we have to bring attention to the vital function of political imaginaries or horizons of possibility. The



assertions of common principles, binding rules and rationales, notions of rights, responsibilities, emancipation and the good reappear ad nauseam in politics. However, even when a universal is asserted, it depends upon the deployment of differentiation. This logic of *appearance* is important, as it may seem like an axiomatic principle to suggest that novelty depends upon a certain kind of uniqueness that differentiates itself against what has gone before, and what it is not, but it is an inherent characteristic of ‘generic truth’ *if it is made contingent on a subjective encounter with the event*. This last point is important to stress, for there are of course alternative modes of conceptualising universal truths, such as through a common rational capacity for the comprehension of the world, or a belief in the logician’s power to determine common rules for the appearance of truth.

Within Badiou’s philosophy though, from *Being and Event* onwards, *events are contingent and being is multiple*. I would argue, that we should therefore treat generic truth in that context, namely, that it is more ‘ontic’ than ‘generic’ – a contingent configuration in a world of fleeting forms (Marchart, 2007: 5 & 7-8). There is always the possibility that if we overemphasise the place of generic truth upheld by the fidelity of the subject to the event, that we then promote a starkly ahistorical mode of politics, one that is at odds with the broader logic of change and ontology of multiplicity present in Badiou’s work. Instead, it seems more productive to emphasise the manner in which a truth-procedure is always split from within in terms of the general principles that it might seek to assert and the ways in which it might seek to reconfigure the world it finds itself in on the one hand, and the differentiation, contingency and conflict that makes it possible on the other.

### 6.3. Fidelity as a Very Material Encounter

Bearing in mind the above, it is helpful to then ask how a leftist revolutionary form, a kind of worker subjectivity, might differ to the Enlightenment or postmodern subjectivities discussed in Chapter Four? The straightforward answer is that the kind of worker subjectivity that I discussed in Chapter Five is important on account of its very difference, and difference brings a possibility for change. This difference does not depend upon its confirmation of a prior tradition of protest or a sharp change from one order of politics to another, but instead upon its ability to carry novelty within a world. A significant element of that is the departure from a prior model of party-state-centric worker activism that it brings, but such a change is ultimately of little significance if it cannot be sustained - what I referred to in Chapter Five as the ‘half-life’ of the event.

In *Ethics* Badiou equates the event with “a kind of flashing supplement that happens to the situation”. He adds that what guides fidelity to the event “must be something like a trace, or a name, that refers back to the vanished event” (Badiou, 2001: 72). It is also in *Ethics* though that Badiou introduces the notion of the evental encounter, as a lived experience of a novel political real. In Chapter Five I argued that the encounter must be ongoing, that fidelity depends upon the ongoing encounter with the conditions of genesis of the event, and not on a retroactive rhetorical act of nomination. I noted that this was not an attempt to discount the enduring function of nomination, that the manner in which communities of faithful subjects identify as such can be a powerful political force. Furthermore, the ‘trace’ of past events and the deployment of historical memory are similarly important.

*Logics of Worlds*, however, brings a departure from any previous overemphasis on the evental flash, by drawing out the importance of the ‘evental present’ (Badiou, 2009a: 62).

Different forms of subjectivity emerge in this context. The faithful subject, such as the Spartacan “slaves ‘*en corps*’”, moves within a world with a new sense of its own subjectivity as distinct and novel, with cascading effects that follow from its example. Other subjective forms – reactive and obscure – bring novelty that follows, but it is of a different order, a form that denies the new political real in the case of the obscure subject, or one that clings to an old form in a new way in the case of the reactive subject (Badiou, 2009a: 51-52, Pluth, 2010: 144).

For a novel form to persist it must be repeatedly asserted. This is very much an active process. Following Badiou’s example of the Spartacan Revolt, we can also use Jacques Rancière’s example of knowledge transmission in the school or university, which usefully highlights the misplaced assumption that a performance or lesson can be transmitted readily from performer to spectator. He notes that performers can be just as, if not more, passive than spectators – such as through the routine and institutionalisation of an actor or teacher (Rancière, 2009: 12 & 14). Instead, knowledge transmission that is properly egalitarian and emancipatory follows a ‘third thing’, something that is not known by either party, be it the schoolmaster or the ignorant student. In Badiou’s terms we would think of this as the supplement to the situation wrought by an event. In Rancière’s example the provocation of the schoolmaster encourages the student to learn something that he does not himself know. As such, what is important is what is not shared in transmitting the idea – the element of surprise and contingency – as opposed to a common order of signs (Rancière, 2009: 14-15). What is really significant in this example though is that it highlights the necessity of a kind of active imaginary in reacting to the provocation of the event. In this sense, the declaratory naming of an evental trace is not enough, but something more proactive is required of the subject, namely its ability to subtract a new

politics from an old statist order. Hence, ‘investigation’ would involve a more thoroughgoing material engagement with the contradictions present in a situation than a rhetorical reaction.

The difference between the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution and Chinese workers in 1989 and subsequent years provides a good example in this regard. As I noted in Chapter Three, much of the language used during the Cultural Revolution was politically safe, whether through references to the Paris Commune or deferential praise of Mao – what Badiou praises as a ‘tenacious fidelity’ through nomination in *Being and Event* (Badiou, 2007a: 358). In comparison, in 1989, this mode of rhetoric breaks down. It did not reflect the political reality that the workers experienced. The relationship with the party-state, intellectuals and political leaders was fractured, the contradiction between a socialist state and capitalist economic reform was pronounced.

In the first case, during the Cultural Revolution, the contradictions between what Mao and the party leadership said and what they did in practice, as well as between a supposedly anti-bureaucratic campaign and the entrenchment of top-down controls were not exploited in a manner that might produce an immediate and lasting political scission. In the second case, the workers were able to break free of the shackles of the party-state precisely because they did not continue to identify with a preceding lineage of thought. This scission was not thinkable within a previous mode of political being and its concomitant encyclopaedia of acceptable thought. It was only because of a particularly visceral and material encounter with novel experiences that a new way of thinking about praxis emerged.

This is a particularly important point to highlight, for the state of the situation can be supported by a proletarian subjectivity and a leftist mode of politics, especially so in a communist state. There is not only a rightist, reactionary state as Badiou often seems to imply. Instead we have to think of the state of the situation or a world in the clearly delineated philosophical terms that are given in both *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds* as that which orders appearance and relationality. As I noted in Chapter Two, the ‘metastructure’ in the former text implies a more hierarchical mode of ordering than the ‘transcendental’ in the latter, but both do not inherently fix a particular political or ideological definition of what constitutes a situation or world. If we make such an addition it is a rhetorical gesture grounded in its own political present in time, but outside of the broader logic of contingent historical change that is present in Badiou’s work. This is not to suggest a necessary dialectic or telos but to support the fleeting nature of change in Badiou’s philosophy – a mode of change that necessarily prohibits the attempt to enclose the political.

#### **6.4. Dialectics**

In concluding the thesis I wish to relate the above to broader scholarship on Badiou’s work and its usage in thinking about contemporary activism or resistance and political change. My principle methodological departure in this thesis has been to treat Badiou’s politics and attitude towards historical narration with scepticism concerning its function in his wider philosophy. All too often the relationship between the two has been assumed *on Badiou’s terms*. I stress this point because whilst excellent accounts of Badiou’s involvement in leftwing politics have been written, in the majority of cases Badiou’s account of what constitutes Maoism or left wing politics has been unreflexively carried into analysis of his work. Doing so might help to show Badiou’s own intentions within his writing, *but it does*

*not necessarily help us to gauge the effectiveness, coherence and wider applicability of his philosophy.*

When I first approached Badiou's philosophy I did so as somebody who was broadly sympathetic towards his political positions. It became apparent to me at an early stage however that his politics and his philosophy were not as easily reconciled as other readers of his work would have us believe. As an investigation of Tiananmen inevitably led to a broader engagement with the history of Chinese communism and the Cultural Revolution these issues were given a clearer form in relation to Badiou's understanding of fidelity and change. All too often it seemed that the partisan nature of truth in his work led in directions that were antithetical to detecting the emergence of genuine novelty within a situation or world.

As I have shown in this thesis, fixed referents in *Badiou's understanding* of the history of leftwing politics are all too often deployed as an interpretive grid. Further, designations of truth-procedures follow the same pattern, making particular subjective forms privileged agents of change akin to persistent sociological categories. Likewise, what are essentially contingent and fleeting subjective forms and truths in a world of multiplicity are all too often made 'eternal' (Badiou, 2009a: 9).

I believe that these issues can help to shed light on a division within scholarship on Badiou's work, between accounts that emphasise the centrality of Maoist dialectics and those that privilege an account of eventual rupture predominantly based upon a reading of *Being and Event*. As such, might it be the case that the dialectic has a kind of redemptive function for Badiou's work as a whole? Do we need to emphasise the kind of ahistorical

and militant orientation towards truth that I have critiqued in this chapter, or are there other alternatives?

Badiou's political polemics are synonymous with an overemphasis on rhetorical acts of naming that relate to a kind of historical 'forcing' within much of his work and readings of it. That forcing has been related to both Maoist 'investigation' (Bosteels, 2005) and eventual rupture (Hallward, 2003). Bosteels and Hallward have been two of the principle parties in this regard, with valuable contributions on Badiou's work. In *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (2003) Hallward provided one of the first authoritative English-language studies of Badiou's work, before much of it had been translated. In that text he argued explicitly that Badiou had been opposed to a dialectical interpretation of the relationship between 'truth' and 'knowledge', 'subject' and 'object', or indeed, 'subject and subject' and that doing so naturally precluded: "any productive exploration of relationality, that is, an exploration that is able to conceive of relations in terms more nuanced than those of inclusion or subtraction, on the one hand, or (in Badiou's most recent work) of mathematical equivalence ( $=$ ), nonequivalence ( $\neq$ ), and order ( $>$  or  $<$ ), on the other" (Hallward, 2003: 224 & 274). Bosteels, however, has argued that Maoist investigation provides a kind of unifying theme across Badiou's work, with truth traversing established knowledge of a situation so as to force a change from old to new, and in this sense truth and knowledge are always dialectically entwined (Bosteels, 2005, 2011).

Both accounts have much to commend them. Hallward is correct to emphasise the anti-dialectical and ahistorical currents that rear their heads in Badiou's philosophy, particularly *Being and Event*, even if it is problematic to extend such an account more broadly within his work. Likewise, Bosteels is right to point out the effects of Badiou's own admitted

fidelity (is it fealty?) to (his vision) of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism. For Hallward, the absence of the dialectic signals the centrality of nomination, that “as a figure of pure affirmation or conviction”, the subject is “responsible only to itself” (Hallward, 2003: 288-289). For Bosteels, historicising Badiou shows that a Maoist logic of scission undergirds all of the referents that Badiou deploys in his work, and thus militant nomination is also central in his account (2005).

Unfortunately, in Bosteels’ account however, he assumes, following Badiou, that the Cultural Revolution introduces a schism into the leftist revolutionary tradition, and as a result a kind of intransitivity comes to characterise the political. Badiou’s approach then is very much of our time, in Bosteels’ eyes, and able to interpolate emancipatory change in the absence of ‘social’ and ‘economical’ “class based antagonisms” (Bosteels, 2005: 618). In this sense an event would “at the same time bring about a subtraction of being and a destruction of a regime of appearing” (Bosteels, 2005: 619).

If we follow Badiou and Bosteels and assume that the Cultural Revolution is the signal event of the ‘end of the insurrectionary paradigm’ as it has functioned on the left, and use that caricature as the measure of praxis it seems that we arrive at an overly idealist reading of history, one in which the precise mechanisms of change beyond a rhetorical forcing are never especially clear, and one that would occlude the kind of material encounter that I discuss in Chapter Five with regards Tiananmen. Bosteels’ account also brings us perilously close to the kind of reification of a post-political world that I discussed in Chapter Four - the manner in which Agamben uses Badiou to characterise Tiananmen.



A particular reading of a finite and contingent political form that is extended into a more general mode of historical critique seems to imply a kind of ahistorical historicism, wherein ‘anything goes’, and the intransitive event functions in isolation to the diversely constituted situation – a position that is not the case in *Logics of Worlds* for example, wherein the event has an immanent function within a world (although there are still examples that lead in the other direction, such as Badiou’s depiction of the Cultural Revolution within that text). It seems then that a decision in favour of the Cultural Revolution, May ’68 or any other event that is made the measure of change is a decision against the dialectic.

In *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* this conflation of fidelity with a necessarily finite and worldly expression of universalism (which is nonetheless made ‘eternal’) is most clearly seen.

Badiou’s description of Paulinism is exemplary of the contradictions that characterise his understanding of fidelity. The necessarily groundless nature of truth is asserted. A truth-procedure is even equated with a fable – the challenging of the real with the unreal (Badiou, 2003: 4). Simultaneously though, judgement between truth and falsity repeatedly emerges, between ‘true-thought’ and ‘false universality’ (Badiou, 2003: 7). Badiou is above all interested in Paul because he is the bearer of a particular kind of universality in which it is judged via its support of a type of multitude. As such he quotes Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Badiou, 2003: 9). This mode of politics is for Badiou just the kind of required antidote to counter contemporary capitalism and modes of statist ordering.

Badiou's criticism of capitalism is that all difference conforms to what he calls the 'count of the count' (Badiou, 2003: 10), or what would be termed as 'marginal utility' in the discipline of economics today (Wakker, 1994). As such capital is able to productively exploit contradictions. Competition and innovation can challenge old modes of production. The inherent instability of marketisation and the pursuit of profit can challenge fiscal stability. Such change alongside the exploitation of wage-labour has often produced political and social upheaval, which the state has been remarkably adept at pacifying with welfarism and enfranchisement. Whilst the idea of the free circulation of capital is important to the maintenance of capitalism, it is the reduction of all to a measure of marginal utility that is primary, i.e. the productive value to the system of capital accumulation and exploitation *as a whole*. State and market within a capitalist order are thus subordinated to a broader logic of power, albeit one that finds its expression in diverse forms (Harvey, 2011, Wakker, 1994).

We have to ask though whether Badiou's Pauline deployment of universalism effectuates the same operation as marginal utility in capitalism. How can difference be preserved by such universalism? Badiou praises Paulinism as a contrast to French identity today in which immigrants must 'assimilate' to the grand values of the Republic (Badiou, 2003: 8-9), but the Pauline example is not one of multiculturalism, it is itself the replacement of particularity by a meta-identity before God. Badiou also contrasts Paulinism to "that military despotism known as 'the Roman Empire'" (Badiou, 2003: 7), but perceptive students of empire can note the manner in which successful imperialists from the Romans to the British have used difference as a device of rule. Of course, dividing the map on sectarian lines, paying-off tribal leaders and playing them off against one-another is as morally dubious as the proselytising zeal of a holy empire, but there is a difference in how

identity is understood. For Badiou, the French Republic today demonstrates the evils of ‘identitarian’ thinking (Badiou, 2003: 8), but how is cultish fidelity to the event any better? We might remark that at least a multicultural society has the ability to maintain a certain amount of diversity, even if particular standards of assimilation are mandated. It is difficult to see the same orientation to difference in communist purges or a Christian ‘inquisition’.

As such an ‘either or’ binary between universalism and difference, as I discussed above, seems to be misplaced. To argue for example that politics was absent in the Roman Empire as Badiou does ignores the important kinds of dialectical relationships that emerge in such a context between the native world of the ‘metropole’ and those on the ‘periphery’ of the empire. As Wright has argued, it is in the context of both hierarchical colonial ordering and the lateral ‘everyday’ constitution and maintenance of colonial rule that resistance is to be found. Using the case of slave resistance under British (and firstly Spanish) colonial rule in Jamaica he highlights a dialectic between an “everyday, tactical and very often cultural form of resistance on the one hand, and the much rarer outbursts of insurrectionary violence on the other” (Wright, 2013: 230). Within such a context a kind of merger of cultures and logics under the frame of colonial rule takes place. In the case of Jamaica, Wright notes, this was ‘creolization’ in which: “Both white colonisers and black colonised were assimilated into the disciplines, practices and interlocking values required by the peculiarities of the plantation system” (Wright, 2013: 231).

Likewise, as Jack Goody has argued, the day-to-day imperatives of imperial rule fed back into the European sense of superiority. Whilst the mechanical clock, for example, had its origins in China, it came to be developed further in the West from the Fourteenth Century onwards. The clock then became a mechanism through which an ‘utter contempt’ for

peoples and cultures who could not ‘keep time’ emerged. Universal discourses that articulated an inherent superiority of the European emerged here out of the problems of management in the empire – Africans could not keep time and were unsuitable for factory labour, to cite an example given by Goody (Goody, 2010: 17). The mechanisms of spatially and temporally marking the world became means of constituting the object of imperial discourse – the non-European ‘other’. In this sense the processes of imperial domination did not follow a broad and sweeping discourse akin to Edward Said’s ‘orientalism’, but the reality was that the myriad drivers of domination and the problems of managing that very domination instituted novel modes of perceiving non-Europeans that contrasted them negatively against the European (Said, 2001).

Returning to Wright’s Jamaican example, this kind of assimilation, concomitant with a sublimation – what agency was exercised was as a slave – provided the framework for counter-hegemonic resistance or conformity (Wright, 2013: 231). As such, the distinction between ‘opposition’ and ‘resistance’ was important, as resistant ‘energies’ could be ‘dissipated’ by the pursuit of ‘tactical gains’ (Wright, 2013 & 231-232). Everyday opposition could provide the bridge however to ‘full-blown resistance’, often through cultural channels/practices (Wright, 2013: 232).

A Wilberforcean narrative ultimately came to provide a historical ‘whitewashing’ as the agency of slaves was subordinated to the rational benevolence of the liberal citizens of the metropole, post-abolition (Wright, 2013: 233) – not entirely dissimilar, I would argue, to the kinds of triumphant accounts of the end of communism and of the Tiananmen protests that were seen in 1989 and the early-1990’s, through which the validity of the Western liberal-democratic model was exalted.

It was though, Wright notes, the universalising count of empire that also framed the slave resistance through the dialectic between reform in the metropole and resistance in the periphery (Wright, 2013: 244 & 246):

“I would argue that it was in fact the ongoing, creative and indefatigable defiance of slaves that compelled the slave system to take such brutally repressive forms, thereby distancing it from the moral standards of the mother country” (Wright, 2013: 238).

The ordering count of empire was able to pacify ‘black bodies’ in the periphery through the new counting of ‘citizen-subjects’ in the metropole (Wright, 2013: 244). This act of counting though also constituted an event site, as the singularity of the count necessarily could not encompass the “excrement multiple none of whose elements were presented as belonging to the overarching set” (Wright, 2013: 243), namely, “Africa as a political, cultural, spiritual, and racial alternative to plantocratic rule” (Wright, 2013: 244). The very attempt at a universal capture therefore sowed the seeds of resistance in its occlusion of difference that evaded the count, but a difference that was immanent to its world.

It is later in the chronology of resistance in Jamaica though that Wright provides some particularly interesting tools for our purposes here in thinking about how universalism itself can function as a counter-hegemonic force in a dialectical sense. Wright argues that the Morant Bay revolt (1865) demonstrates an inversion of Badiou’s arguments in *Ethics* that as opposed to a simulacral event coming after a real event, a real event can proceed from a simulacral event. Morant Bay therefore follows the Emancipation Act of 1833 and the former reveals the contradictions of the latter, as martial law displays the excesses of state power (Wright, 2013: 258). This is not dissimilar to the dialectic that I noted in

Chapter Two between political imaginaries, or new horizons of political possibility and statist repression.

It is though through the place of race that we see the precise function of generic truth. As such, resistance is not so much grounded in a “metaphysical ‘Africa’, with the ancient civilizations of Ethiopia or Egypt, or with the supposedly inherent qualities of African resistance to a tragic history of oppression”, although such referents are important, but instead race functions as “an empty cipher for structural inequality” (Wright, 2013: 262). Drawing upon *Logics of Worlds* Wright notes that race is related to the transcendental that orders relations between the constituent elements of a particular world – it is not an ‘ontological problematic’. The transcendental and the ontological do intersect though, he adds, in “the structural non-appearance of the void in a world”. As such there is not a kind of ontological ‘outside’ that can be invoked, but appearing is entirely relational, and generic truths must be understood in that context – as specific to a finite worlding (Wright, 2013: 261):

“This is where Badiou’s rather rigid emphasis on commutative relationality even in situations of conflict in *Logics of Worlds* comes into its own again. It enables us to perceive the race relation as both violently structuring and a matter of mere appearances, both concrete and without underlying essence. Moreover, non-appearance may expose a null degree of relation with the transcendental measure that organises that particular world (white privilege, for example), but *a null relation is still a relation*” (Wright, 2013: 261).

Further:

“Far from allowing itself to be captured by the dominant discursive construction of ‘blackness’, it is only as the abject yet defining (relational) Other of colonial white supremacist discourse and material practice that ‘blackness’ here has revelatory and transformative power” (Wright, 2013: 262).

In this example then, the generic truth that undergirds resistance to racism is premised upon its subtractive power immanent within a world, as opposed to the assertion of some kind of new meta-structure, such as Black Panther-style militant and violent black identity politics (Wright, 2013: 260). Wright cautions though, that if we overemphasise “relational, site- and time-specific factors” that an evental sequence can be robbed of its rupturing power by promoting a problem solving narrative in which solutions from within the encyclopaedia of the state are deployed, and underlying structural inequalities therefore remain, such as enfranchisement in 1944 in Jamaica or the granting of full independence in 1962, “as if the former was not a fig-leaf for ongoing social inequalities distributed along racial lines, and as if the latter was not merely the inauguration of a new period of neo-colonial oppression” (Wright, 2013: 257).

A significant issue arises here though in relation to the precise manner in which we frame this problem, one that I would argue is not merely semantic pedantry. At the beginning of the thesis I noted that Badiou’s choice of language can indeed be problematic, and that is certainly the case when we think about the ‘eternal’ nature of a truth procedure. In short, my principle complaint here relates to whether we use the term to refer to a recurring problematic that is kept alive in a truth-procedure, or whether a more troubling onto-

politics is implied. Badiou's invocation of particular political referents implies the latter, whilst scissional periodisation, an ontology of substantive multiplicity, change and co-constitutive/dialectical relationality and appearing implies the former.

This is an important problem that cuts to the heart of how we understand subjectivity and fidelity. If we take events to be contingent and truth-procedures to be localised within worlds or situations, then we are emphasising the recurring power of the evental present, discussed above. Whilst horizons of political possibility or utopian imaginaries, and historical memory are important, the encounter with the evental present is the mechanism through which they are incorporated into a truth procedure, with effects in a situation or world. Racism, sexism, worker struggles, etc. can take place in markedly different contexts here, and whilst at a very basic, reductionist level there might be a commonality, there are also many routes to interpreting these struggles, which can lead in different directions. 'Rights' discourses might for example speak to a kind of society-centered rationalism, such as in Hegel's account discussed briefly in Chapter Two, a right to difference embedded in a universalised notion of 'human rights', a belief in consumerist rights, or a communitarian understanding of egalitarianism and the collective right of the body politic, etc. Badiou provides us with the tools for thinking about how these kinds of varied accounts might contribute to both ordered continuity and contingent rupture, even if he fails to engage sufficiently with the precise, embodied material effects in terms of institutional structures and political economy.

Precisely what it is that constitutes a 'faithful' truth-procedure will be context specific. As Badiou notes in *Logics of Worlds*, with the example of the Spartacan revolt, "subjective deliberation, division and production" takes place in the evental present (Badiou, 2009a:



51-52). Strategic decisions pertain to the embodied material effects of a truth-procedure through the singular choices that emerge within a situation. It is the gathering of these ‘points’ of decision in a determinate direction with determinate effects that demonstrates the coming-to-being of a subject for Badiou:

“In this sense, a subject exists, as the localization of a truth, to the extent it affirms that it holds a certain number of points. That is why the treatment of points is the becoming-true of the subject, at the same time as it serves to filter the aptitudes of bodies” (Badiou, 2009a: 51-52).

A truth-procedure is therefore contingent upon the precise configuration of these points as they are encountered within a specific world. Borrowing from Wright, we might term this further as “the productive interaction between different but not incompatible fields of forcing in a lived militant assemblage, but one founded on the real of the void rather than on any imaginary essence” (‘evental culture’) or, “a structure of consistency without indulging an imaginary of the totality” (‘braiding’) (Wright, 2013: 290).

As such in Chapter Two, quoting Howard Caygill, I noted that we should be seeking an understanding of resistance (and political change more broadly for that matter) that: “requires an understanding of conceptuality that permits consistency without imposing unity” (Caygill, 2013: 7). It seems that the deployment of referents from a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition can threaten to introduce the kind of imaginary of the totality that Wright discusses, by subordinating the necessarily contingent nature of the encounter with the points of decision discussed by Badiou in *Logics of Worlds* to a kind of necessary telos.

I am not advocating a kind of positivism in readings of Badiou's work, i.e. that we should strictly separate worldly politics from a philosophical system grounded in formal logic. What I do wish to see however is a more reflexive attitude towards the political. It is in this sense in the dialectical relationship between universalism and difference, rupture and periodisation, that the kinds of political categories that we might seek to employ in present material struggles should be problematised. In this regard, we are not speaking of the deployment of a political 'outside', but an immanent 'investigation' that cannot be approached if we treat the political as an intransitive force, divorced from the objectifying, taxonomical force of a truth-procedure in a contingent worlding. Ultimately, the effectiveness of 'fidelity' as a concept for understanding change that escapes the state of the situation hinges upon this fact.

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